

THE SON OF
RICHARD CARDEN

Mr. Neil Bell has written the following novels:

TIE SEVENTH BOWL
VALIANT CLAY
PRECIOUS PORCELAIN
LIFE AND ANDREW OTWAY
TIE MARRIAGE OF SIMON HARPER
THE DISTURBING AFFAIR OF NOEL BLAKE
TIE LORD OF LIFE
BREDON AND SONS
WINDING ROAD

THE SON OF
RICHARD CARDEN

A NOVEL

BY

NEIL BELL

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To
MARTIN, STEPHANIE AND NEIL
With Love

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CHAPTER I

MAINLY SPECULATIVE

I AM no psychologist but I am decidedly much interested in the innumerable winding alleys, side-paths and by-ways of that partially-explored labyrinth, the human mind. To the best of my recollection that interest dates back to my quite early adolescence; certainly I was still at school when I began to be fascinated by the working of my own mind and to watch its processes objectively with something of that detachment I presently brought to the watching of the mental processes of my fellow pupils, my masters and those other people young or adult with whom I was in contact, either intimately at home or superficially in the world outside. Possibly, indeed probably, in looking back I exaggerate not only that interest, that fascination, but my powers of observation and deduction and graft on to the wild guesses of boyhood the discoveries of maturity; I imagine most of us do this in attempting any sort of review of our lives unless one have a mind of fine temper and first-rate quality and one which has moreover been disciplined by that habit of careful selection which is usually only acquired by men of science. To none of these attributes do I lay claim: my mind is, I should guess, a very average sort of instrument and I have always used that instrument empirically rather than scientifically, and mental discipline has always irritated and fretted and antagonised me even more than physical. Nevertheless, the interest was there whatever may have been the ability behind it and it remained a major factor in my life until it became centred upon someone else and thereafter, unless I deceive myself, it faded rapidly and at last vanished so that now I watch myself, if at all, with precisely that quality of indifference with which we

flick over the pages of a stranger's family-album of snapshots. Perhaps, after all, that interest, that fascination, upon which I at one time prided myself were no more than commonplace egoism, the rash of that universal malady which life usually cures somewhat drastically before the twenties are reached. If that be so then my own cure was belated and had, as I have said, to wait the coming of someone else, my son Alister, of whose life this book is, despite surface appearances, far more the chronicle than it is of my own. It is not merely that had Alister not been born this book would not have been written, but that he is the very core of it from the beginning to the end. That is the essential truth of this story. This then, from the first word to the last, is the story of Alister Carden; this is his book; he is dominant, paramount; a live man walking through a portrait-gallery; a human being in a crowd of ghosts—Alister Carden, my son.

I imagine I could have been little more than five or six when I realised with some completeness that I was a distinct and separate personality from all other people and that to this distinct personality had been given the name Richard Carden. There was a period before then when I was not only Richard Carden but "me," the "me" being someone more intimate and more real than the bearer of that name by which I was known not only to others but to myself. I do not remember this period but I infer its existence from a similar phase in my children and especially in Alister.

It is an odd business this labelling of human beings and it is clear by the ceremonial so often attached to the bestowal of the label that mankind has given a quasi-mystical significance to the assumption of its name by the babe. Even where the mystical element lacks there is a tendency even among the most sceptical and matter-of-fact, to ascribe an importance to the choice of a name which goes further than the

mere matter of euphony or taste or family predilection. It may well be a pathetic fallacy to believe that a fine and gallant-sounding name will bestow upon its bearer some of its own magnificence and that a mean and commonplace name will make a mean commonplace man or woman; but it is nevertheless difficult to imagine a Victor being a cringing scamp or an Alison being anything but a woman of quiet and gracious charm.

We are given this name, this label; we wear it through life; at the worst we soil it and at the best cover it with honour. It is, this labelling, as I have said, an odd business; food for speculation without end but I fear the sort of profitless speculation abhorrent to the disciplined mind. Let it be left at that. I inherited the label Carden from my father and my parents gave me the other Richard. And at five or six I was aware of the distinct personality of that being, Richard Carden. This awareness was not complicated by my meeting with another personality bearing the same name; it did not, I am sure, occur to me for years that there could be such another person and I have often wondered what the mental effect must be on seven-year-old Tom Jones meeting for the first time another seven-year-old Tom Jones—or, for that matter, seventy-year-old.

Considerably later than this period in my life (for I was a backward youngster and could not read to myself with any ease until I was ten—or certainly did not) I read about the grotesquely horrible death sometimes inflicted upon Chinese malefactors: the death of a thousand cuts. I do not remember now whether there was a picture or whether I conjured up for myself an image of what such a death must be, but it undoubtedly became a permanent image in my mind and originated the thought which came to me years later and which for all its falsity both actual and emotional I am still inclined to uphold as true: we all die a similar death, a death of a thousand cuts; die piecemeal; parts of us physical, mental and spiritual are killed by strokes of misfortune, by

betrayal, by disillusionment so that when at last we come to die there is little left for the last oblivion to cover. Fancy, fantastic nonsense, whimsey as this may be, *is* indeed I do not doubt, I am utterly convinced that when I was twenty-four something died in me that was never born again; something was killed in me and killed by a woman. Absurdly banal, futile, nauseatingly sentimental as that sounds it is, unless I do not know myself at all, the plain truth. And the woman was Barbara Grey. Barbara, the loveliest of all names for a woman; and how fitly, how gracefully, it moves side by side with Grey; Barbara Grey; was that a label to be borne by a woman capable of so savage a thrust? And is this the consistency to be expected, demanded, from the teller of a straightforward tale? For my consistency or inconsistency I make no appeal, no apology; what I am I was made and added to myself and what that is will appear as a shadowy background before which strides the protagonist. As for Barbara, Barbara Grey (I write the name again for the very pleasure of its lovely sound)—as for Barbara, I say, perhaps viewed by another than I, viewed even by herself, the thrust was not savage, was gentle, pitiful. It may well have been all that; the point is irrelevant; the knightly *coup de grâce* is as mortal as a brutal bludgeon-stroke.

In looking back now I find it extraordinary how little I remember vividly of my boyhood up to the time when I left Allardyce's School in the City of London at the age of sixteen. Fewer than a dozen clear pictures make up that personal gallery; there are hundreds of blurred and misty ones and many others so dim as to be no more than the swiftly passing shadows of shadows; but how few are the vivid clearly-drawn pictures and how trivial! The trivialities that hook themselves into our minds and remain lasting memories when more important matters have long faded! And the few vivid memories I have I am quite unable to place in any chronological order; they are just a jumble dredged up hap-

hazard from the swarming shoals darting through the dark places of my mind.

There is my father half-way up a step-ladder, his hair on end, clothes and face bespattered with whitewash, shouting and cursing and slashing madly with the brush in a fit of fury incomprehensible and frightening to the small watcher sitting on the kitchen floor regarding the bucket of whitewash with envious eyes. I can call up that picture at any time and feel again the fear and bewilderment which then possessed me. There is, again, my mother standing regarding the blade of a knife she has just plunged into a cake taken from the oven, her face flushed, her forehead wet with sweat, her lips compressed. "Drat it!" she says and pushing the cake back into the oven slams the door and then moves over to the stove to pour herself out a cup of tea from the teapot which seemed always to be standing there. There is my father darting naked out of the bathroom, pipe in mouth, an incongruous figure, fascinating yet alarming in his unfamiliar nudity; he beats the air with one sweeping hand, snarls between his teeth clenched on his pipe-stem (all his pipe-stems had little holes bitten into them), "The dam' water's never hot, never hot!" catches sight of me, aims a cuff at my head and retreats swiftly. There are my father and mother quarrelling; my father in shirt and trousers, his hands and boots dirty from his gardening, his back to the fire, his shoulders against the mantelpiece; my mother some distance away facing him, her arm resting on the sewing-machine cover; both their faces are white and they are talking fast, my father loudly; the only words of that furious contest that come back to me are my mother's scornful reiteration, "You needn't shout, you needn't swear," and my father's "They can all go to hell; d'you hear that? they can all go to hell!" There is my Uncle Fred, tall and dark and ruddy-faced in dark clothes with a flower in his button-hole and a gold chain across his waistcoat paying us an unexpected visit (I only saw him three times during my boyhood and my Aunt Alice and my cousin

May but twice). He was unaccompanied on this occasion and my father was going to the station with him to see him off. Unnoticed I had followed them into the small dark hall and while my father fumbled with the knob of the front door my uncle said in his deep rich voice, "Your affair of course, George, but you'll be a fool, my boy." And my father replied in a queer thick voice, "Aren't we all, Fred? aren't we all? O God, bloody fools!" And then the door jerked open and the light from the street lamp discovering me crouched against the umbrella-stand he stood regarding me thoughtfully sideways and then said with surprising gentleness, "You'll catch a cold, son, standing there with no breeches; say good-bye to Uncle Fred and cut along in." And Uncle Fred stoops and brushes my face with a coarse moustache and takes my hand clumsily and the door slams behind them and I run back into the kitchen to see what the coin is he has left in my hand. It is a shilling and my mother takes it from me and puts it in my iron money-box, shaped like a church tower with a clock-face and standing always on top of the dresser beyond my reach. That I do not protest at this disposal of the present is some measure of my mother's domestic discipline. I have no pictures of my cousin May but there is one of my Aunt Alice, plump and smiling in rustling satin, sitting eating cake, a cup of tea on the arm of her chair, her handkerchief spread on her lap. I was then very young for I was playing with toys on the floor. Also sugar must have played an important part in my life just then, for all I remember of the long conversation that went on and on between my aunt and my mother (no one else was present) was my aunt's "Haven't touched sugar for years, my dear!" Very young indeed I must have been for "touched" meant "touched" to me and I sat watching my aunt a long while and pondering on the oddness in never touching sugar and wondering whether she thought it was dirty. And again the fact that I did not interrupt the talk with an inquisitive inquiry is significant. Of all my early school days

there is only one very vivid memory. I could only have been about seven or eight for I had but just gone up into the boys' department at the Putney National School. Several bigger boys invited me to play a game which was, I was soon to learn, less of a game than an unpleasant practical joke. Flattered by such agreeable condescension I eagerly agreed and it was explained to me that the game was Robber and Judge and that I was amazingly but delightfully cast for the Judge. I sat down in a corner of the piece of waste ground next to the school playground while the robber took up his position behind me, held by two giggling jailers. There was some laughing and talking and jostling and then I was instructed to say, "Robber you're guilty; deliver up the golden jewels you stole." I obeyed and was immediately aware of a stream of warm liquid running down my neck and back; and scrambling to my feet saw only too clearly the nature of the joke. I spent the next ten minutes or so scrubbing angrily, tearfully and disgustedly at my neck with my handkerchief. Later I frequently saw the trick played upon new youngsters but without, as far as I remember, any other feelings but those of enjoyment at the victim's dismay.

My father was a tall, angular, sandy-haired man, clean-shaven and with the brick-red complexion which so often goes with his type. He was always, in my recollection of him, irascible and moody by turns and a victim of chronic dyspepsia which he ascribed jestingly, but with more than a touch of accusation, to my mother's cooking and which she in turn put down to his habitual smoking. I rarely saw him, except on ceremonial occasions or during meals, without a pipe in his mouth; it was the first thing he put between his teeth on waking and the last he withdrew from them before sleeping; "preserves the teeth," he used to say and certainly when he died he possessed a full set of very strong yellow teeth which, another boast of his, "had never felt a filthy toothbrush." I am inclined to agree with my mother

that his incessant smoking was at the root of his dyspepsia and after a particularly violent attack, when I was about twelve or thirteen, the doctor warned him that if he did not give up his pipe he would probably die from ulceration of the stomach. This may have been a random shot on the doctor's part but my father certainly did die from a perforated gastric ulcer some four years later. It was, by the bye, just after that particularly violent attack that I had a swift gleam of insight, despite my youth, into the relations existing between my parents. I happened to be in their bedroom a few minutes after the doctor had left the house after delivering his ultimatum and my father hoisted himself up in the bed, propped a pillow behind his head and bade me bring him his pipe, pouch and matches; and when some minutes later my mother came into the room he was puffing out clouds of acrid shag-smoke with immense contentment. My mother regarded him angrily for some moments and then resting her arms upon the bedrail at the foot of the bed she said sharply, "Is that all the notice you take of Dr. Stenson's warning?"

"That's all, dam' his eyes!" my father replied, his lips writhing back in a mocking grin.

"You're not going to give it up?"

"Give it up?" he said; "if I give up my pipe what's left, hey?" His glance went to my mother's face, and for a long moment they stared at each other and in that double stare was so much meaning that it was suddenly plain even to me that my mother and father hated each other. All the implications of that hatred did not, of course, occur to me, but the simple fact was clear enough. I do not remember whether the thought then crossed my mind that I had never seen them kiss or exchange any sort of caress; perhaps it did not, for I do not think I had ever then seen married folk kissing, and the lack of these endearments in our family circle would not, therefore, have impressed me. They rarely kissed or caressed me and while neither of them ill-treated me my father's usual attitude to me was one of casual indifference

and my mother's a sort of irritated, long-suffering, half-contemptuous patience. I imagine my mother was innately incapable of any deep feeling, sexual or maternal, and looking back upon their uneasy association I judge that they did not cohabit after the first year or two of their marriage. This way of life apparently suited my mother, but I am inclined now to think that it played no small part in my father's outbursts of violent temper and succeeding periods of savage gloom.

My mother was tall and thin and grey; that is the sole impression her physical personality left upon me—grey-faced, grey-haired, grey-clad, grey-tempered; a grey unhappy woman dourly and patiently waiting for the end of the sorry cheating thing called life.

My father was an employé of Hayter & Brown, the publishers in the City, and it will perhaps portray him most clearly if I say that until he was dead I never knew what position he held in the firm, nor did my mother know the salary he earned. He was, in fact, in charge of the Juvenile and Educational department (a very minor and unimportant one in those days) and his salary was two hundred a year. That this was fifty pounds more than my mother had believed was made very plain to me by her bitter outburst on receiving, a few days after his death, a letter from the senior partner saying that in consideration of Mr. George Carden's long and faithful service they had decided to grant her one year's salary, and a cheque for two hundred pounds was enclosed. The letter came while we were breakfasting, and after she had read it she sat staring before her for a long while in silence. And then she looked over to me and said venomously, her mouth twisted by what was perhaps the first passion of fury which had ever shaken her, "Your father was a liar and a beast, but I did not know till now he was a thief. D'you hear that, Richard? a thief." Her contorted face, no less than the bitter accusation against the father I had seen lowered into his grave the previous day, shocked me into a dumb and

horrified bewilderment so that I could only sit there, the food in my mouth suddenly dry and choking, and stare across at her in incredulous horror.

"D'you hear?" she repeated after a long pause.

"Yes," I said at last.

"Well, don't forget it," she went on, resuming now her habitual grey flat tone; "and he's robbed you as well as me. You're sixteen, Richard. Your father and I had been married two years when you were born."

"I know that," I said, looking over at her grey face and hating her.

"How much is a pound a week for eighteen years?"

"About a thousand pounds, roughly," I replied.

"Roughly will do. Then you can reckon your father's robbed you, my boy, of five hundred pounds. That would have come in nicely now, wouldn't it? Kept you at school another two years and sent you to college, especially if you won a scholarship like you did to Allardyce's. Well, that's all done with. You'll have to leave school and go to work. Your father's employers have sent me two hundred pounds; the insurance is a hundred and twenty, and there's about forty in the bank; the funeral cost twelve pounds and there's some outstanding accounts which won't leave much out of the forty. So you can say we've got three hundred pounds, my boy, and not a penny more to come from anywhere, not a penny-piece any more anywhere or ever. You'll have to leave school and find employment and we'll have to move."

"Why shall we have to move?" I asked. "Couldn't we take lodgers?"

"The lease won't allow it. We'll have to move to somewhere where it's permitted. A pleasant look-out, isn't it? Lodgers! Perhaps I can get some charing."

"I'm sure you needn't do that, Mother," I was beginning, believing the suggestion a serious one, when she interrupted me harshly. "Don't be a fool. What we've got to think about is what *you're* fit for." And then, on a milder note,

"What d'you think you can do? Never mind what you'd like; beggars can't be choosers, and that's what we are, thanks to your father."

But I had borne enough. I looked over to my mother and abruptly it came to me that unhappy as she might be and had always been with my father, he had suffered the more. I could see him lying in the grave; I could hear again his terrible groan of pain when he collapsed after dinner the day before he died; I could see him stretched out upon the floor of the living-room, his face ashen, the sweat in great drops about his mouth and on his forehead, his fingers clutching at his chest. I pushed back my chair and standing up, I gesticulated wildly and cried out, my voice breaking, "It's a lie! It's a lie!" and turning away quickly I rushed from the room and, hurrying upstairs, locked myself in my bedroom.

I left Allardyce's school at the end of the following week. I had been there four years, having won a scholarship from the Putney National School. I had an interview with Dr. James, the Head, before I left, at which he expressed his sympathy at my loss, his regret at my leaving, and his willingness to do anything in his power to assist me in obtaining employment. But his good offices were not needed, for a week later a letter arrived for me from Hayter & Brown's asking me to call at the office at ten the following morning. I was there a full twenty minutes before the hour, but it was nearly eleven o'clock before I was shown in to Mr. Hayter's private room. The senior partner, however, made amends for the long wait. After expressing sympathy at my father's untimely death and eulogising his work for the firm, he asked me my age and commented that he should have taken me for at least a year older, adding jocularly, "You appear to do credit to your mother's cooking." I was, it is true, big for my age (a bare inch under six feet and weighing nearly eleven stone) and looked nearer eighteen than sixteen. I had much of my father's fairness but without his excessively high

colour; my grey eyes and regular features I inherited from my mother. Mr. Hayter went on to ask me about my schooling and informed me with a gracious smile that he was an old Allardycian. Finally, after a longish monologue on his part devoted to praise of the high and honourable calling of a publisher, he offered me a post as clerk in my father's department at what he assured me was an unprecedented salary for my years—fifty pounds a year. "I must point out," he added pleasantly, "that the large salary is due more to your father's work for us than to any merits of your own, for those we have yet to discover. However, I see no harm in saying that you seem a promising young man, and provided the head master of Allardyce's gives you a good character you may start here next Monday at nine. If you hear nothing further you take it that we are satisfied with your head master's report. Good-morning."

I had no qualms at all regarding the Head's report on me, for I was the head of the fifth form and the youngest prefect in the school; I had, moreover, only the previous term won the school prize for mathematics and Latin composition. I therefore returned home and told my mother that I had been given a post at Hayter & Brown's and was to begin there the following Monday. And upon that day, shortly after nine, I commenced clerk in the department where for nearly twenty years my father had been in charge.

CHAPTER II

DISCOVERIES

I CERTAINLY earned my initial salary of fifty pounds a year at Hayter & Brown's, not through merit or assiduity, but from my treatment by Arthur Meakin, who had succeeded my father as head of the Juvenile and Educational Department. Meakin was a little man, little all round, little and mean; his mean little features set in a sallow face were perfectly suited to his meagre stooping body and the mean petty spirit which animated it. Like most small men I have met he was spiteful and vindictive and I quickly discovered that he had loathed my father. I was somewhat longer in discovering the reason for that intense dislike, but when I did so I was as much astounded as if I had alighted upon some violently criminal act in my father's past life; for the plain fact was that Hayter & Brown considered he had possessed a flair for his work which almost amounted to genius and that it was only his violent temper and untidy habits which had barred him from being offered a partnership. That discovery almost shocked me; my father a genius! that tall, angular, sandy, pipe-smoking, untidy, shambling creature, cursing and gesticulating in ineffectual fury one moment and the next sunk into savage gloom! he a genius! he to be so valued by an old firm like Hayter & Brown's as to be seriously considered as a partner! the notion was incredible, preposterous; it threatened to overthrow the image in my mind and to replace it by something grandiose and magnificent with which I could establish no contact. And so I thrust it away from me; it was, I said, just blindness on old Hayter's part or a foolish partiality. My father was the violent, gloomy, ineffectual dyspeptic my

mother and I knew so well and no genius. I said nothing to my mother of this discovery; perhaps for all my incredulity I was proud of my father's reputation in the firm and feared my mother's bitter sarcasm if I had mentioned it. She would certainly have found a supporter in Meakin.

I wish I could portray Meakin; could make it clear how that mean-souled little rat must have disliked and envied my father, and how during the time I worked under him he sprayed upon me the accumulated venom of years. My size did not help matters. I was conscious of a certain ludicrous quality in the position when he was admonishing me, his mean little head cocked up upon the scrawny stalk of his neck; and I took pleasure in looking down upon him much as I had done with prefectorial magnificence at some small boy at Allardyce's. It was also by no means an easy matter for him to find adequate grounds for my admonishment as my tasks were simple and straightforward and not at all beyond the capacity of a normal boy even younger and considerably less intelligent than I was; and it was therefore frequently plain that his reproof was a factitious one. I was not slow to take advantage of this and several times turned the tables upon him by suggesting that the matter be referred to Mr. Hayter. However, these victories of mine were few and far between and in the main the bigger guns, as always, carried the day and, obviously, my artillery beside his was a mere battery of pop-guns. But the point needs no stressing; there are a thousand ways in which the head of a department can make a junior's life a burden and Meakin knew all of them and spared me none. Long before I had been a year with the firm I was meditating picking the little rat up by his collar and the seat of his trousers, thrashing him humiliatingly over his desk and depositing him in his waste-paper basket. But while common sense and a realisation of the wry humour of the situation did something to prevent such an outburst it was the economic position which really caused me to deny myself that hearty pleasure. How many men must have

denied themselves the joy of thrashing a rat because of a woman and a couple of kids in a small flat in suburbia.

Not that it was a woman or children in my own case; it was simply my own position that bothered me, although, since I was living with my mother, she also came into the calculation. We had within a month of my father's death left the house in Putney and moved into another in the King's Road, Chelsea, near *The World's End* public house. Here there were no restrictions as to lodgers and for some months an odd assortment of these birds of passage came and went. It was a poor quarter and so many of the lodgers, in my mother's phrase, "came without luggage and went without payment," that it was soon apparent that taking lodgers was more likely to be a debit rather than a credit entry in our domestic economy, and for some weeks we kept the spare rooms vacant and considered other ways of adding to our resources. My mother would have preferred a post as house-keeper but, as she was careful to point out to me, that was out of the question until I was self-supporting, which would not be for some four or five years. I was less pessimistic and thought that I should be in that happy position in less than three years, and therefore suggested to her that if she gave me a hundred pounds, by using that as capital and drawing upon it at need, I could eke out my pound a week until my salary at Hayter & Brown's was sufficient to live upon. My mother, however, would not hear of it and refused even to discuss its possibilities. She also vetoed my proposal that I should seek a better-paid post or, as a last resort, join the army or navy; and since this exhausted my suggestions we were back at our starting-place with no other possible alternative but to renew the effort to make lodgers profitable. And then, the day before our "lodgings to let" notice was put back in the window, my mother heard of an elderly couple named Guppy who wanted to rent a half-house; and within twenty-four hours the furniture had been cleared out of the upstairs rooms and the Guppys had moved in bag and baggage.

Guppy was a retired railway-guard with a small pension; but a lifetime of parsimony and saving (I was to learn ere long something of the closeness of his fist) had amassed for them a fair sum which, invested in railway shares (then paying handsome dividends), enabled them to look forward with complete absence of financial worry to a comfortable old age. I never knew Guppy's Christian name, for his wife always called him by his surname as they had, when quite young, been in service together. He was a short, fat, baldish man with an iron-grey moustache and a heavily lined, leaden-coloured face; he neither smoked nor drank alcohol, but was a hearty eater of what my mother called tinned rubbish, and the flatulence he suffered from very audibly was probably the consequence of his gluttony. I had noticed, even at that immature age, how frequently men who prided themselves upon their abstinence from alcohol and tobacco were addicted to glutinous feeding. Mrs. Guppy (whom her husband invariably and rather ludicrously called Ducks) was also short and fat, but a small eater—"no more'n a pecker," in Guppy's phrase—but she was an inveterate tea-drinker, and it was this habit of hers which later on made her a welcome visitor in our kitchen in the afternoons. I don't exaggerate at all when I estimate my mother's tea-drinking at thirty cups a day, and this amount she had consumed ever since I was old enough to take notice of her habits. We shared the bathroom and W.C. with the Guppys, and while they did most of their cooking on an oil-stove my mother had agreed that they might use the oven in the kitchen for any special occasion. Their strange indifference, during the discussion, to their rights in the bathroom was quickly explained by the fact that baths were not part of their domestic routine and the whole time we lived in such close association with them I do not remember them once taking a bath, hot or cold.

Before I had been with Hayter & Brown a year I was already disillusioned and disappointed. It was not Meakin's

persecution of me which made me dislike the post, but the deadly monotony of the work (I did little more than copy out extracts from old and non-copyright books) and further, the conviction I slowly came to that the whole thing was book-making at its very lowest, the production of cheap rubbish to be sold in quantity like so much of the cheap tinned foods that were just then beginning to come on the market and which, according to my Uncle Fred's diagnosis a few years later, were the cause of the rapid increase in the nation's digestive troubles—the United Kingdom of Dyspepsia and Constipation was his pet name for the British Isles.

At that period the Juvenile and Educational Book Trade was in the hands of fewer than half a dozen publishers and while two or three of these produced work that was good according to their lights—and it must be admitted that they were dim and gloomy lights—the others were rapacious rascals who unloaded upon parents and teachers a mass of worthless new stuff compiled from equally worthless old stuff and sold so cheaply that it was hopeless for anyone else to compete with them by selling decent material at a fair price. On whose shoulders the blame should rest for this sorry treatment of children I do not propose to inquire. Parents and teachers were probably equally to blame with the publishers; but that is now long ago and for all I know to the contrary children to-day may have the cream of the world's literature for the asking; certainly by the time Alister was going to school there had been a considerable improvement. But, as I say, when I was at Hayter & Brown's the quality of the books for children's gifts and for the use in schools was so deplorable as to disgust even me, a young fellow of seventeen whose knowledge and taste in such matters was proportional to his inexperience.

At the end of my first year at Hayter & Brown's I received an increment of ten pounds, and at the end of my second year a further ten pounds was given. But upon this occasion Mr. Hayter sent for me and told me that they were not entirely

satisfied with my progress and I should receive no further increments until considerable improvement was shown. "Mr. Meakin," he added, "is of the opinion that it is not lack of ability which is the trouble, and I must say, Carden, that I agree with him."

I was furious, but asked mildly, "May I know, sir, in what way my work is unsatisfactory?"

"You are certainly entitled to know that, Carden; decidedly so. I am sorry to be so blunt, but in brief, Mr. Meakin considers that—er—that it is your—er—application which is at fault."

"That means that I shirk my work, sir?"

"Well, yes, I'm afraid it does mean that, Carden."

I must have flushed, for he was continuing on a milder note, "but there, I'm sure you'll—" when I interrupted, "Mr. Meakin dislikes me, sir."

"Dislikes you, Carden? Nonsense, nonsense. Why should he?"

I could have given him a very good reason but I was wary enough to see the futility of such a course and remained silent. He put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat and leaned back in his chair so far that I had a wild hope he would topple over backwards. "Why should he, hey, my dear young fellow?" he resumed; "you are mistaking disapproval for dislike, an error young people are apt to fall into. Mr. Meakin, as your superior, is responsible for your work and naturally he can't be expected to smile approvingly when that work is scamped, or shall we say not done as well as it might be done considering your abilities, which are quite above the average, quite. So put all such thoughts out of your head, Carden, and just put your back into your work and I'm sure there'll soon be a very different tale to tell and that Mr. Meakin will be the first to tell it. All right now," nodding his head genially in dismissal.

On my way home that evening I thought the business over and quickly determined that the sooner I left Hayter & Brown's

the better it would be for my future; for I was aware that in my present frame of mind Meakin's pinpricks might easily goad me into assaulting him, and I had sufficient experience and common sense to know that thrashing the head of a department was the worst of all possible qualifications for obtaining a new post. I had no ideas at all as to what that new post was to be; it was enough for the time being that my decision was taken to leave Hayter & Brown's; I even left undecided the question whether or no I should wait until another post offered before quitting the present one. During the latter part of my journey home that evening I weighed the pros and cons of telling my mother of my determination and discussing with her my plans for the future. Before I had alighted from the tram I had made up my mind that nothing was to be gained by taking her into my confidence, a thing she had never encouraged and one which I had rarely done except in my very youthful days. But I needn't have bothered about my mother, for when I reached home I found that things had been taken out of my hands as far as she was concerned.

Mrs. Guppy met me at the front door. She wore that air of hushed yet zestful solemnity which I was sufficiently experienced in the ways of life to recognise as heralding calamitous news. "Your ma's very bad," she said breathily; "it's a stroke; the doctor's jest gone; he's coming again at eight; you can see her if you like, but she won't know you, poor dear."

I nodded. "All right, Mrs. Guppy," I said, feeling curiously indifferent at the news. I felt her glance following me as I pushed past her and walked towards my mother's bedroom and the atmosphere of that narrow hall seemed suddenly charged with hostility.

I closed the bedroom door quickly behind me almost in Mrs. Guppy's face. She had evidently intended to follow me in, but that abrupt closure balked her and as I turned to the bed I heard her steps go slip-slopping away in her felt

shoes over the oilcloth. I looked at my mother and could not repress a shiver of disgust. Her face was chalk-white except for a leaden tinge about the mouth and eyes. Her false teeth had been removed and her mouth sagged open; a dribble of saliva ran down her chin; her eyes were shut, her breathing rapid, noisy, choked. I stood there a long minute regarding her and found no other feeling in my mind but repulsion. I knew that I had never loved her, had grown near to hating her, had feared her as a child and of late had been contemptuous of her. I took a towel from the rail to wipe her mouth, but as I approached the dribble augmented to a rapid flow and I turned away and, dropping the towel, walked quickly out of the room and made my way to the kitchen to eat my tea. I found nothing prepared for me and was suddenly furious. I began to get my own tea, making a great noise as I did so, as a sort of futile protest, but against what or whom I made no attempt to discover.

The doctor came again just before nine, told me what I already seemed to know, that it was doubtful if my mother would recover, and promised to look in about midnight. But when he came then my mother had already been dead an hour.

"It's the best thing that could have happened," he said, looking at me searchingly.

"Yes, I expect so," I replied, not understanding him.

"You know your mother had cancer?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I never knew she had anything the matter with her."

Something in my tone or my manner must have irritated him, for he went on sharply, "She'd been under treatment for the last three years. It was inoperable. She would have died within a year and her death would have been distressing."

"You mean it would have been painful?"

"Very. For her. She must have suffered a good deal this last year or two."

"She said nothing to me," I replied.

He made no comment, but turning from the bed moved towards the door. "I will send along the certificate," he said, as I let him out. "Good-night."

I returned to the bedroom and for a time stood watching the face of the dead woman; it was no longer repellent; it was no longer anything at all. I began to wonder why she had not told me of her illness, of her pain, and how it was I had never noticed that she was suffering. A foul thing I had heard cancer called, the pain unbearable, the end dreadful. And she had had it for years and endured the pain and told me nothing. I felt a stir of admiration for that dour courage; but that was all. I had never loved her and now she was dead I could not pretend anything else. I did not care. As the doctor had said, it was the best thing that could have happened. She was dead; there remained but one thing now to do, to bury her. I bent over her. It was many years since I had kissed her or she kissed me. I could not have kissed her then to save her from damnation. I pulled the sheet back over her face, blew out the candles and went to my bedroom and slept soundly till my alarm clock woke me at seven.

The evening following the funeral I went for a walk in Battersea Park to think things out. There was about a hundred pounds in cash and the furniture—or rather what was left of it, for we had sold a good deal when the Guppys came. With that sale as a standard I reckoned what remained would fetch fifty pounds and there and then decided to sell it, to leave the house in the King's Road and to take a furnished bed-sitting-room nearer the City. I thought I would call in at the furniture people on my way home, but finding the place closed I turned into *The World's End* for a glass of beer. I was hot from my walk (it was high summer) and thirsty and the glass was quickly followed by a second and a third which I drank more leisurely, taking it over to a seat by the window. Once again I reviewed my position and found things not at all bad. One hundred and fifty pounds would

in those days go a long way; I was earning thirty shillings a week at Hayter & Brown's and I could get a bed-sitting-room with full board for sixteen or seventeen shillings a week; clearly I could rub along quite comfortably for a while and take my time in looking round for more congenial work; for more than ever now that I was a free agent I was determined to put up no longer with the petty tyrannies of Meakin. In the best of spirits from the beer and the new prospect of freedom and a wider life before me, I sauntered home in the warm July dusk, a trail of bluish smoke floating behind me from my first briar, bought only two days previously. It seemed to me as I strolled along that life was very good, that it was fine to be young and my own master, and that beer and tobacco were marvellously pleasant.

But the pleasures of the evening were not yet over. I found on reaching home that Mrs. Guppy had got supper for me and had apparently gone to some trouble to make it an appetising one. There were cold beef and ham, tomatoes and lettuce, a cold apple tart, a jug of custard and a slice of new dutch cheese. There was also a glass jug of water. I regarded it for some moments distastefully and then, with the realisation that I was now a man and my own master, I emptied it down the sink, wiped it dry on a napkin, and went out to a near off-licence and brought back a pint of beer—the first alcoholic liquid that had entered the house during our tenancy. The meal over and the jug emptied, I filled my pipe, lit it, and lay on the sofa in a very contented reverie. There was presently a knock at the door and Mrs. Guppy came in to clear away. She sniffed at the tobacco fumes and I saw her glance go from my pipe to the table and thence to the jug to whose sides a wisp or so of joyous froth still clung. I hoped she would make some comment; I was more than ready for it and was prepared to launch out with a panegyric on beer and tobacco and to defend the rights of man; but I was disappointed. I felt, however, in the mood for talk and thinking

there was no time like the present, I said, "I'll be leaving here pretty soon, Mrs. Guppy."

"Will you," she replied non-committally, taking up the four corners of the cloth to shake the crumbs into the grate.

I puffed out a cloud of smoke and nodded. "Yes; no reason now why I should live so far from the City. I shall sell the furniture and get lodgings."

"Perhaps that would be best," she rejoined, folding up the cloth and putting it in the dresser drawer. She picked up the laden tray and said, "P'raps you'll open the door for me," and as I held it open she nodded, thanked me and bade me good-night.

Barely ten minutes later there was another knock at the door and at my mumbled "Come in!" the door opened and revealed Guppy himself. "Disturbing you?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "d'you want anything? Come in and sit down."

He took an arm-chair, with his back to the window and, after breathing heavily for a moment or so and wiping his forehead with an immense red and blue handkerchief, he said, "Thought we might talk a bit o' business."

"What about?" I asked bluntly, rather surprised, and wondering what was coming.

"Well, you see, it's like this," placing a gross hand upon each fat knee, "Mrs. Guppy's jest been telling me you're thinking of leaving."

I still had no inkling of what he was driving at and at another time might have asked him sharply what the devil it had to do with him, but I was feeling far too physically content to quarrel and so I merely said, "That's right; what about it?"

"And you're thinking of selling your bits o' sticks?"

So that was it! I nodded. "Yes, I called in at Boothroyd's on my way home, but they were shut."

"Why worry 'bout Boothroyd's, if you see what I mean?"

I did see, or thought I did. "You mean you'll buy the furniture?" I asked.

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as that," he went on judicially; "but I might p'raps make an offer for some of it. You'd get next to nothing from Boothroyd's. Second-hand stuff's a drug on the market, can't give it away a'most."

"What d'you mean by next to nothing?"

"Jest a manner o' speaking," he replied with an assable, slow grin; "but true all the same. Jest a quid or so, I reckon."

"They paid us thirty for the last lot we sold and it wasn't half what's left and nothing so good."

"I dare say; I dare say; two years ago, wasn't it? Been a slump in second-hand stuff since then. You ask anybody."

"Well, I'll ask Boothroyd's."

"No need to be 'asty. Now look 'ere. Supposin' we make a sort of inventory together—"

"What, to-night!" I interrupted.

"No, no! 'Course not. Hardly be what you might call decent, your poor mother only jest cold, as you might say, but—"

"The sooner I move the better," I interrupted again; "and it's doing no harm to my mother to be sensible about things."

"Quite right; jest what I always say; what's the use o' pretend—"

"And so," I went on quickly, "I shall call in at Boothroyd's to-morrow and ask them to come along and make an offer."

"I see," a trifle flatly. And then, brightening, he added, "you'd find it better if you made an inventory first."

"I dare say you're right. Well, I'll do that when I come home to-morrow from the office and leave Boothroyd's till the next day."

"Mind if I help?"

"No. Very good of you."

"That's the ticket. And if I take a fancy to anything, or Ducks does, why, there's no harm done in making an offer, now, is there?"

"Not so far as I can see," I laughed. "And there'll be no

harm in my taking it, if it's a good one. So we'll leave it at that."

"Right you are; right you are, then, Mr. Carden." And heaving his bulk slowly out of the arm-chair, he nodded to me with great amiability, bade me good-night and withdrew.

I did, however, call in at Boothroyd's on my way home from the office the next evening and received an unpleasant surprise. "Second-hand furniture, sir," the manager said, spreading his hands and hoisting his shoulders almost to his ears, "our warehouses are full of it; can't give it away; young couples are buying cheap new stuff these days that's worn out before their love is, and *that's* quick work, eh?" with a wide commercial smile. "Sorry, we can't make you an offer. Yes, I remember we did buy some things from you, but that was what, now? a year ago? *Two years!* My *dear* sir, you might just as well say two hundred as far as the furniture trade's concerned. Sell them back to you for half what we gave and glad to do it. You see?" Again the wide commercial smile, with this time more than a hint of dismissal about it, a hint I took without more ado.

The inventory, which I presently made with Guppy, with Mrs. Guppy hovering about in the combined rôles of critic, final arbiter and (in a whisper) Spenlow to Mr. Guppy's Jorkins, would, I imagine, have supplied material for a satirical comedy had the right man been there to watch it.

"That bed, now, Mr. Carden," Guppy said, pointing his stubby licked pencil to the big mahogany four-poster in which my mother and father had slept and loved and hated for half a generation, "is a bit of all right as an antique, I dare say, and if the room was twice as large and you'd a skivvy to sweep under it and make it and turn the mattress and what not, but as the sort of thing to put, say, in a lodger's room, well, I ask you!"

"You don't want it?"

"Not as a gift. But I'd take it over with other things in

consideration thereof, as you might say. Couldn't do anything with it, could we, Ducks?"

Mrs. Guppy shook her head hopelessly. "Sort o' thing the very look of puts a girl's back up at once," she said.

"I'll sell it for firewood," I said irritably, making a tick on my list. "Now, there's the parlour suite; that's not antique, anyhow."

"We got one already," said Guppy, putting the pencil into his pursed up mouth.

"You don't want it, then?"

"I wouldn't say that. We might——"

"It's a better one than yours," I put in bluntly.

"Is it now?" very amiably, "what d'you say, Ducks?"

"Well, it is and it isn't," Mrs. Guppy replied judicially; "I mean to say it *was* better, p'raps, once, but it's had more wear and——"

"Is it worth a fiver?" I broke in impatiently, already sick of the job and the Guppys' prevarications.

"A fiver!" Guppy gasped, "why Boothroyd's 'll do you a bran' new one for fifteen an' a life insurance policy thrown in as——"

"Dam' Boothroyd's!" I snapped. "D'youth want it?"

"Well, I don't reckon we do, eh, Ducks? But we'll take it off your hands for a quid."

"And the four-poster in consideration thereof?" I put in with a sarcastic thrust that missed its mark, eliciting merely an agreeable nod from the Guppys.

By ten o'clock I was tired, hot, infuriated and above all, thirsty. The big cool bar of *The World's End* called to me invitingly. I looked at my inventory. The offers the Guppys had made so far amounted to ten pounds and were for about a third of the furniture. "Look here," I said desperately, "give me twenty pounds for the lot as it stands, everything, sheets, blankets, pots and pans, spoons and forks, cups and saucers and—and dish-clouts," I ended venomously.

The pair withdrew for a whispered colloquy voiced chiefly

by Mrs. Guppy, while her husband contented himself with head-shakings and grimaces meant, I gathered, to betoken ruin. Mrs. Guppy presently came over to me and said softly, "Guppy might consider fifteen for the lot, Mr. Carden, for the sake of your poor mother, and seeing as how——"

"Oh, all *right!*!" I shouted angrily; and then, looking over to Guppy, I said, "You'll give me fifteen pounds, is that it?"

"Well, Mr. Carden, I wouldn't go so far——"

"Damnation!" I roared; "will you or won't you?"

"No need to get huffy. We'll say fifteen then."

"All right. Hand it over."

"Can't do things like that," shaking his head slowly and smiling maddeningly; "we'll have it on paper all square and ship-shape and we'll pay a quid on account, four quid at the end o' the month, and the balance in, say, six months."

"You'll what?"

He was beginning to repeat his rigmarole when I cut him short furiously. "Why, blast you!" I said, "d'you think I'm going to wait six months for the money? The deal's off and you can go to hell. I'll show you what I'll do with the dam' stuff." I stooped and picked up a flat-iron which Mrs. Guppy, for unknown reasons, had been carrying round. "How's that!" I yelled, and hurled it with shattering effect at the overmantel for which Guppy had offered ten shillings and which I knew had cost seven guineas.

"That'll be fourteen-ten now," observed Guppy calmly. "A silly thing to do, Mr. Carden, I must say. Put that poker down now and let's talk it over."

"I want fifteen qu—fifteen pounds *now!*" I said, with a hysterical catch in my voice; "do I get it?"

"Four——" he began, when a sweep of my poker scattered a big white china lamp to dangerously flying shards.

"Fifteen," I said, keeping my voice low and looking round for a fresh target. I must have looked a menacing figure to that plump elderly little pair of sharks; I was fully six feet tall, weighed over twelve stone and was in a violent and reck-

less temper; that I imagine is the simple explanation of Guppy's sudden and unconditional surrender.

"All right, then," he said, shooting me a sidelong glance of scared fury; "stop it; fifteen it is."

"On the nail?"

He nodded. "I'll get it. You set down and don't go smashing any more of our stuff. A silly fool trick. Wilful waste means woeful want." He shambled out of the room, Mrs. Guppy slip-slopping after him, and presently he returned with pen and ink and a sheet of paper and asked me to write out and sign the receipt for fifteen pounds. "Haven't got a tuppenny stamp, I suppose?" he added.

"I haven't."

"Don't suppose it matters."

"And," I added, "I'll have the money first."

He seemed on the point of arguing. I glanced at the clock. It was nearly eleven and I wanted a drink badly. I felt that if he said another word I should hit him. I saw his eyes flicker to my face and then he drew out a small washleather bag and slowly counted out fifteen sovereigns.

The Guppys had agreed to allow me to stay on until I had found new lodgings, but since, as Guppy pointed out, I was now using their furniture, I was to pay for this convenience if my stay lasted over a fortnight. I was determined it should not last over the week-end if I could help it, and that day at the office I inquired from all and sundry about lodgings. "Not more than a mile from the City," I stipulated; "and not more than sixteen shillings a week." After getting some half a dozen opinions and a load of advice, it seemed that one stipulation ruled out the other: if I wanted to be as near the City as that I should have to pay anything up to twenty-five shillings a week. One of the packers, an elderly man living in the suburbs, was the most helpful. "Tottenham Court Road would suit you, I reckon," he said; "one o' the little streets running off it, o' course; that's well under two

miles from the office and you ought t' get a bed-sitting-room for a quid with good grub."

I thanked him and decided to spend that evening looking round off the Tottenham Court Road. Sixteen shillings was my limit, but I did not expect any difficulty there. Landladies, I knew, often had a sliding scale dependent upon the appearance of the would-be lodger, and mock modesty was not and never has been an attribute of mine.

Either I exaggerated my physical assets or the landladies in the neighbourhood of the Tottenham Court Road whom I interviewed during the next few evenings were proof against such unprofitable appeal, for the lowest figure quoted me was sixteen shillings a week with no midday meal except on Sundays; and the room was only by courtesy a bed-sitting-room, being, in fact, a smallish bedroom with an arm-chair and a hanging book-shelf thrown in, in consideration thereof, as Guppy would doubtless have said. Six luncheons with my hearty appetite and fondness for good food would have cost me at least eight shillings at any decent public-house where the fine and plentiful shilling ordinary would require for its full enjoyment half a pint of bitter beer, and twopence was the minimum to be offered the waiter without incurring a contemptuous flicker of the eyelids. After a week of this wearying chaffering I became sick of the whole business and closed with the offer of a good-looking young married woman, Mme. Martine, in Toft Street, near *The Horseshoe* tavern. She was an Englishwoman married to a French waiter and offered me a very comfortable furnished bed-sitting-room with all my meals for a guinea a week payable in advance. I paid my guinea on the spot and arranged to move in the next day.

That evening, after I had my tea, I told the Guppys I should be leaving on the morrow, and then went for a walk in Battersea Park to think things over, finishing my evening at *The World's End*. Four glasses of good beer, while tingeing life and all my prospects very rosily, could not hide from

me the fact that I could not for long live on my present salary if I were going to pay a guinea a week for board and lodging and enjoy existence as I fully intended to enjoy it. And the solution of that difficulty was plain: I would ask for a rise. I was getting seventy pounds a year. I would ask for eighty-five, and upon that I reckoned I could manage pretty well. But whether or not I got my rise I was quite determined to leave Hayter & Brown's as soon as I could find more congenial work.

As I fell asleep that night I was quite certain Hayter would give me what I asked; but I was by no means so sure the next morning, and while going up to the City in the 'bus I picked up a *Daily Telegraph* left by a passenger and spent five minutes (not unprofitable ones, as it turned out) going through the Situations Vacant columns. I noted down three or four which seemed likely, and one especially, for a clerk on the advertising side of *The Financial Gazette* in Fleet Street, I doubly underlined as being eminently suitable: had I not carried off at school many mathematics prizes? and if finance were not a matter of mathematics, what was it? The post seemed made for me.

It was doubtless this assured feeling that a first-rate and very congenial job was merely waiting for me to step into it which consciously or unconsciously dictated my manner at the interview with Mr. Hayter just before noon that day. I remember that interview word for word. I have, by the by, an uncommonly good memory in this respect; provided I can call up a scene in which I have played a part, no matter how many years ago, I can remember with almost the accuracy of a phonographic record every word spoken, not only by myself, but by others present. In other respects my memory is not outstandingly good, but in this it is quite remarkable, and I have never met anyone else similarly gifted.

" You are asking for *what*, Mr. Carden?" Mr. Hayter said, raising his brows with an exaggerated expression of surprise when I had made my request.

"For a rise, sir."

"It is not two weeks since you had one." As I did not comment upon this he went on, "And you cannot surely have forgotten the somewhat unpleasant discussion we had upon that occasion?"

"No, sir."

"Well, frankly, I don't understand you. I think it best left at that."

"You mean you refuse my request, sir?"

"Decidedly."

"You don't think I'm worth more, sir?"

"I do not."

"Not more than a paltry thirty shillings a week, at eighteen, for eight hours' work a day?"

"It is work I could get done, and equally well done, I will say no more than that, for considerably less."

"It's unskilled labour?" I asked, feeling my face flushing.

"It does not require a vast amount of skill, does it?"

"Does *any* work in this rubbish-factory?" I retorted angrily.

"That will do, Mr. Carden. Will you please see the secretary in ten minutes from now."

"You're sacking me?"

"Obviously."

"Why?"

"Don't be absurd, or insolent."

"And without a reference, I suppose?"

"Certainly not. I think you are a very foolish young man and one who has a great deal to learn; I think, when you recall this interview later on, you'll agree that you have been exceedingly discourteous; I'll put it no worse than that; but I am aware that youth and many of the civic, social and commercial virtues don't run well together in double harness, and I am quite willing to overlook what has passed, in so far as a reference is concerned, and I will assure you it will be as good a one as possible in the circumstances. And now I must ask you to go. I am sorry you are leaving like this, but

I quite sincerely hope you will have nothing more tangible to be sorry for, and I wish you the best of good fortune." He held out his hand, which I grasped, smiled, nodded to him, and made my way out as jauntily as I could manage.

I felt somehow a trifle sheepish when ten minutes or so later I made my way to the secretary's office. I wanted to curse old Hayter, to feel furious with him and aggrieved at his treatment of me; but for the life of me I could not work up any genuine feeling in the matter, and when, after a few short formalities, the secretary handed me a cheque for two months' salary, I was forced to admit that Hayter was rather a fine old cock. A few days later he added a thumping good reference to the coals of fire already heaped upon me.

Pocketing the cheque, I slipped into the various departments to say good-bye to the few friends I had made during my two years with the firm; and then, on the strength of the unexpected windfall, I went along to Simpson's to treat myself to the most expensive luncheon I had so far eaten in my life. It cost me four shillings and ninepence, and would have satisfied a hungry giant; and in the strength of that prodigious meal I presently went along to the offices of *The Financial Gazette* to make a personal application for the vacant clerkship.

A plump, suave, middle-aged, fair man in pince-nez, who had obviously also just returned from a very satisfactory luncheon, jotted down particulars of myself and my attainments and then very ominously, so I had always been led to believe in such circumstances, said that I should be written to and waved me out with a fat white hand whose index and middle fingers were stained an ochreish yellow.

But the omen, if such it were, must in my case have been good and not evil, for two mornings later I found by my plate, on the breakfast tray Mme. Martine brought in, an envelope with *The Financial Gazette* in red old-English lettering on the flap. I cut it open slowly, taking considerable pleasure in noting that I was at least showing no signs of excitement, and

read that provided a satisfactory reference were received from my present employer (I had not mentioned the fact that I had been sacked and trusted to Hayter not to do so) I could begin my duties there at ten o'clock the following Monday morning. Hayter's reference, a copy of which he sent to me, was, as I have said, a thumping one, and he also very generously restrained from any mention of my dismissal : a very decent old cock indeed!

And on Monday, August the third, at ten o'clock (a most agreeable hour, I thought) I began work in the advertisement department of the longest-established and soundest financial newspaper in the world, as I was very soon told in no uncertain words.

CHAPTER III

EXPERIENCE

THE plump, suave man with the smoke-stained fingers I found to be Mr. George Kelsey, the business manager of the paper. He was nominally my chief, but I rarely saw him and even more rarely held any conversation with him. The man who was actually (and very actively) in charge of the department was the assistant business manager, Frank Sprague, a young man of five-and-twenty who was a revelation to me of human possibilities and potentialities and, better still, perhaps, a needed corrective of my growing opinion that I was more intelligent than most of the people I met and a pretty smart fellow all round. Sprague was in the colloquialism of the time, "hot stuff," and in that of thirty years later "a live wire." Kelsey very wisely never interfered with him, gave him his head, backed him up completely and, I fancy, got out of his way with admirable discretion; and Sprague ran that very important department with its staff of three men and five girls with a success that trebled the advertising revenue of the paper in a lustrum; and it was all done with that apparently effortless ease which is the mark of the virtuoso and the despair of the sedulous plodder.

He loved figures as my Uncle Fred loved flowers. But it went much further than a mere love of figures; he had a passion for pure mathematics, that rarefied mental atmosphere where only the subtlest intellects can breathe. And yet so cool, so firm, was his control of his mind that he could harness and subdue it to the comparatively petty tasks of financial advertising, for that was the main work of the department: to keep filled the weekly thirty-two columns of

small advcrtisemcnts. It was work in which his mathematical genius had no scope, was entirely wasted; it was as if Rodin were employed to dust the Elgin marbles. There could have been quite a happy hunting-ground for him upon the editorial side of the paper but with that he had nothing whatever to do; the editorial and business sides were as apart as painting and stockbroking, and only once during my two years with the paper did I ever see the editor, Sir Lionel Capes, in our department.

That I should so eulogise Sprague may seem a trifle ludicrous, sentimental, lacking in proportion, for after all he was not the world-conquering genius he seemed to me then; but it must be remembered that it was the first time I had come into contact with anyone possessing a mind of the calibre of his; I had reckoned myself very good indeed at mathematics and during my schooling, when I had carried all before me, I had never met anyone who could compete with me. But Sprague revealed to me the fact that I had just a bent for figures, little more than a slickness in juggling with them, a mere mechanical control, while mathematics to him meant the most subtle and delicate processes of which the mind is capable; it was the difference between an agile-fingered schoolgirl thumping out correctly her piece on the piano and Mark Hambourg playing Beethoven's last sonata.

And with it all he was pleasant, good-humoured, easy-going and friendly to the point of hail-fellow-well-met; yet no one ever stepped beyond the mark with him. It may be a trifling matter and perhaps I am wrong in ascribing to it any importance as being a criterion of character and personality, but it seemed to me extraordinarily significant that he could joke with the junior members of the staff, use their Christian names, smoke their cigarettes or offer his, toss them for the price of a packt and yet retain his position as boss and exact from them respect, admiration and instant and unquestioning obedience when he demanded it—but demand is not the word; he never demanded anything; he took it for granted

that a thing would be done to the best of one's ability and it was done.

It would be absurd and presumptuous for me to claim that Sprague was ever my friend; he was the actual head, with a salary of five hundred a year, of the department in which I was a ledger-clerk on a weekly wage of two guineas, afterwards increased to three and then four; and yet we did, before he left, reach a footing of association which might legitimately be described as companionship if not friendship. It began when I had been with *The Gazette* about three months; Sprague's secretary, a pretty girl in the early twenties, left to be married and he surprisingly asked me if I would care for the post. "I prefer a man secretary," he said, "and it will be a better job than the one you're doing, or you can make it so."

"I can't type and I don't know shorthand," I replied, inwardly cursing the lack of foresight which had led me to idle away my evenings in public-houses rather than add those two small weapons to my commercial equipment.

"That's rough. How long would it take you to learn enough to rub along with?" Before I could reply he added with a smile, "I learned to write one-thirty a minute in three weeks. And I picked up typing in a week although I admit I'm a heavy-fingered performer."

I already knew him well enough to avoid the obvious flattery and merely contented myself by saying that I thought I could manage to get the hang of both sufficiently well for the purpose in six weeks.

"I'll give you a month," he replied and left it at that; nor did he during that month mention the matter again; but exactly four weeks to the day he sent for me to his room, tested me, expressed his approval and then told me that the post was mine if I cared to accept it. "The salary's three guineas a week," he added, "but if you keep your eyes and ears open you'll learn a lot that will be worth much more than that to you." And then he laughed and said, "My chief

objection to girl secretaries is that they keep their eyes and ears open for the wrong things." My pleasure at the offer must have been plain in my face as he cut in before I could thank him, "That's all right, Richard; I thought you'd do; that's why I gave you only a month to qualify. We'll go straight ahead at once with this batch of letters."

It was only a bare month after this that Sprague said to me one morning, after he had finished his dictation, "How old are you, Richard?"

"Nineteen next month," I replied; "the twenty-fifth in fact, and I only escaped being called Noel because my father abominated Christmas Day; he was a chronic dyspeptic."

"That was hard lines; I mean the dyspepsia."

I nodded. "It killed him when I was sixteen and I had to leave school and look for a job."

"What school?"

"Allardyce's."

"Do any good there?"

"Well, I won no pots or medals but I acquired a few prizes, for maths which I thought myself a whale at, and Latin composition."

"Did you matriculate?"

I nodded. "The month before I left."

"Good. Now look here; you're no fool and this isn't much of a job when all's said and done. I mean it won't lead any further. Any girl of average intelligence can do it and in most places would get the preference over you because she'd accept wages you'd starve on; I don't mean physically, but in those higher appetites which cost money to satisfy. Even if you went over to the editorial side, if you got the chance, you'd get nowhere without some special qualifications, as far as financial journalism is concerned. See what I'm driving at?"

"I think so."

"All right. Quite a good qualification to have is a degree in economics. I suggest you enroll as an external student of

the London University and take your B.Sc. in economics. You could do it in two years with a little grind, and the fees are not large. I'll see if we can't stick the old paper for another guinea a week for you when you've been at your present job twelve months—that'll be next October, won't it? Well, what do you think about it?"

"Would you advise me to stick to the business side? I mean is there more scope than on the editorial?"

"Oceans more; scope's illimitable; other's a coffin compared with it. I've been here barely four years and have twice doubled my salary in that time. I don't expect to be here more than five, but when I take a new post I shall expect to double it once again."

I could not help thinking this cool, even for Sprague; a thousand a year at twenty-six or so. My expression must have shown my thoughts, for he laughed and said, "And once I get over the thousand I shall be surprised and disappointed if I'm not rapidly among the five-figure men. It's the salaries *under* a thousand that are generally quite fairly graded according to abilities; your eight-hundred-a-year man is a considerably more able and valuable chap than your five hundred, as *he* is more than the two hundred fellow; but once you get among the thousands they're all much of a muchness; they're all pretty able men and the reason one's getting eight thousand and another only two is often enough a matter of luck or influence or some other quite fortuitous circumstance; it's getting into the thousands class that counts; you've got to have brains to do that; I'm ignoring the occasional chuckle-head or two who's hoisted into a good job, but I can assure you they're few and far between now, and in a few years they'll be as rare as a white crow, and one day as extinct as the chough in Cornwall. So my advice in a nutshell is stick to the business side, get a degree and then wire in tooth and nail and sweat your way up among the well-paid jobs. D'you drink?"

I nodded. "Beer; not a lot, but I'm rather fond of a few glasses in the evening and one with my lunch."

"You oughtn't to be fond of beer at your age. Hope you don't mind the paternal attitude. I'm twice your age and more in all essentials. I've earned my living since I was thirteen, and at sixteen was keeping the family. Beer's no good; especially if you're going to study in the evening. I should cut it out, say, till you get your degree. I drink myself, but chiefly as a social obligation; I like wine, but I can do without it and often let it alone for months on end. Have you got a girl?"

"No," with a laugh.

"Well, get one. But don't get married till you've a good job. That's a curse, of course. It's a pity a man and a girl have to tie themselves up for keeps before they can live together. If boys and girls could fix up a sort of temporary marriage at eighteen or so, children barred, it would do 'em both no end of good and it could always be made permanent later if they wished. There's even more, perhaps, to be said for a mistress ten years older than yourself. However, it's a waste of breath to discuss the impossible, and so you'll have to do without. But get a girl and knock about with her as a pal, if she'll let you stop short at that; some will; prefer it to the other; and cut out beer. Play any games?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Not much in my line."

"No? Well, a lot of them are waste of time, but rowing isn't; rowing and swimming will keep any man in fine physical condition; they demand it; rowing especially; join a rowing club; there're a dozen you can join for a tenner with an annual sub. of five guineas; that wouldn't break you and it would repay you a hundredfold. All right. You might cut along and ask G. K. if the prospectus for the new issue of Meadshire Distilleries & Wines is to go in. And while you're about it ask him about Colonial Property Trust Limited; he'll know what you mean. Thanks."

What the effect upon my career would have been had I

followed all Sprague's advice it is impossible to say and futile now to conjecture; one portion and one only I did follow: I enrolled as an external student at London University and began to study for the intermediate examination for a science degree in economics. I found the work by no means difficult, and the half-pint or occasional pint of beer I drank with my luncheon did not appear to affect my studies in the evenings, nor did the three or four glasses with which I ended my day's labours seem to have any ill effects; quite the contrary, in fact, and I looked forward to ten o'clock each evening when I could shut up my books with a clear conscience and set off to spend an hour in the sociable, jolly atmosphere of the brightly-lit saloon bars in the purlieus of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street.

I was now not only spending all I earned but dipping frequently for small amounts into my tiny capital. I was fond of good food and I went for my luncheons to places where I could be sure of getting it; the patrons of these restaurants and chop-houses were mainly men in much better positions than my own; they were sleek, middle-aged and well-dressed. Sleekness was something I could not acquire, even had I so desired; middle-age could wait; but good clothes were simply a question of a good tailor and I certainly had the figure to wear them. I went to a good tailor and was presently as well turned out as any of the men with whom I rubbed shoulders between the hours of one and two. It was, in a way, living beyond my means, and I could not have afforded the luxury had I not had my hundred odd pounds of capital to draw upon. But I am convinced it paid me well; I began to make acquaintances (merely nodding and table acquaintances, it is true, but one thing leads to another) among those well-dressed, comfortably-off, middle-aged men, men of standing in their firms, departmental managers and directors, and I have not the slightest doubt that I could have turned this acquaintanceship to good account but for my own folly.

I had passed the intermediate examination and had arranged

to continue my studies when the bottom fell out of things. Sprague left *The Financial Gazette* to become business manager of the new halfpenny daily, *The Daily Post*, just started by Lord Scaife and, better even than he had planned, at a salary of fifteen hundred a year. But that, of course, was not the trouble. His post on *The Gazette* being vacant, I was foolish enough to consider I was not only capable of filling it, but the one man for the job; had I not for nearly two years been Sprague's right-hand man and confidential secretary? Without any conceit, I submit that I knew the work from A to Z and I am sure Sprague would have supported that submission. But Kelsey quickly disillusioned me. I will not say he laughed in my face, but his manner when I asked for the vacant post was derisory. He had, although I did not know it then, already earmarked the post for a brother of his mistress, and I stood no chance whatever. But he was needlessly offensive. Possibly he disliked me, although as I had not exchanged more than two dozen words with him during my two years and three months on *The Gazette*, that is extremely doubtful. It is far more likely that while he gave Sprague his head and stood behind him always, he was secretly envious of his outstanding talents and especially of his success in pulling off at twenty-six the post with Lord Scaife at a salary which was half as much again as he himself was getting at fifty; and this envy, being unable to strike at the real object, turned aside to smite the nearest thing available. Perhaps this is sheer nonsense and I malign Kelsey; but I will swear that his smooth moonface wore a faintly derisive smile and that there was a touch of mockery in his suave tones as he said, when I had made my request, "Quite out of the question, Mr. Carden. Frankly, I am surprised at your temerity."

"Temerity, sir? Surely it—"

But he cut in abruptly with a gesture of his plump hand. "Well, isn't it? You're what? Twenty? You're a ledger-clerk; it's quite true you've been doing more responsible and better paid work for the last few months—"

"Two years, sir," I interrupted; but he waved me to silence and went on, "but that does not make you a suitable candidate for a post which entails the possession of knowledge you certainly cannot possess and abilities you have yet to prove."

"I am sure I could do the work, sir," I rejoined, keeping a tight hold on my rising temper. But at his next words I loosed that hold. It was the height of folly no doubt, but I was young, sensitive to snubbing and moreover supremely confident that my talents would quickly find me another post, for that my retort meant dismissal I was well aware.

"I've no doubts;" he rejoined blandly, the smooth mocking smile creasing his cheeks; "you've no need, it appears, to cultivate self-assurance. Unfortunately you have up to the present failed to impress me with equal assurance of your abilities."

"You've had no opportunity of judging my abilities," I replied, purposely dropping the sir; "and as for the work, I imagine I know more about it than you do."

He regarded me while one might have counted twenty; his eyes narrowed; he grinned faintly. "Well, good-morning, Mr. Carden," he said slowly, "and good-bye."

"Good-bye? I see. You'll give me a reference?"

"I'll give you nothing. You'll be paid up to to-day and that's all. You're sacked for insolence. Get out."

"We'll see about that," I said loudly and angrily as I got up and moved to the door.

"All right; see about it!" and he turned to the papers on his desk.

I appealed to Sir Lionel Capes, the editor and proprietor, but the small satisfaction I got from him was my wages for a week in lieu of notice; otherwise he refused to interfere.

It occurred to me to appeal to Sprague, but apart from my realisation that it could do no good I felt somehow that it would humiliate me and destroy what small feelings of friendship there existed between us. And so I did no more

in the matter but set myself to look for another post. I never saw Sprague again and only once heard of him some two years later when I saw in the press that he had left *The Daily Post* and gone to America, where he had taken up an appointment with the Hearst newspapers. I never again heard of him; never knew whether or not he achieved the position he set out to gain and which his talents merited; but that was not to be wondered at for my way of life was to lie very far from the great financial waters into which he had plunged.

I had no misgivings at all as to my ability to find a new post and a better one and to find it quickly, nor did I worry about or consider of much importance my lack of a reference from Kelsey. But I either over-estimated my market value or under-estimated Kelsey's influence or, alternatively, his desire to crush me. It may well be that he never gave me and my concerns a further thought and that the mere fact that I had no reference to show from my last place of employment was the sole reason for my unsuccess. I don't know and it does not matter now; but the plain fact was that I applied in vain for at least fifty vacancies in the City and that at the end of six months I was nearer destitution than I was ever to be again. I had pawned everything I possessed barring one suit of good clothes, had moved from my comfortable bed-sitting-room in Toft Street to a poky attic over a mews off Gower Street, had reduced my capital to something under five pounds and was quite seriously considering the pros and cons of enlisting or committing suicide when I met in the saloon bar of *The Horseshoe* in Tottenham Court Road a stranger whom I always regard, in recollection, as the man with a pet joke.

It may seem odd that, so near destitution as I was then, I should still frequent saloon bars; frequent is hardly the word but I certainly still often went into them for a drink and it must be remembered that in those days one could get a glass of bitter for three-halfpence and, into the bargain, help oneself liberally to the cheese and biscuits in baskets on the

counter, always provided one was sufficiently well-dressed to pass muster. It is no exaggeration to say that for days on end I lived solely upon biscuits and cheese and beer at a cost of a few coppers a day and it was only my wisdom in retaining one good suit of clothes with a smart shirt, ties and collars and a passable pair of shoes, that enabled me thus to live almost without cost and to keep a bold and well-dressed front to the world. Indeed had I not appeared to be of his own class and condition I doubt very much if the stranger would have fallen into talk with me, despite the fact that he was slightly drunk and it was that blessed late hour of night when men shed their reserves and cautions and under the benign influence of liquor discover themselves as brothers of all mankind.

Usually I found it wise to avoid these bibulous camaraderies as they were apt to lead to treating which I could not afford; but on that occasion the barmaid had just given me tenpence-halfpenny change out of my sixpence and I was quite ready therefore to do my convivial share.

It was late October and a cold wind was spraying a drizzle on the brilliantly lit windows of the bar. The stranger was a man of, I should guess, about fifty, stocky, with a red face and heavy moustache; he was wearing a brown suit and a brown bowler hat and carried a raincoat over his arm. He cocked an eye at the misty windows, turned his glance appraisingly on me for a moment and then said, "Foul night, sir." His manner of saying sir and, indeed, in the circumstances, his use of it at all made me put him down as a commercial traveller; but probably I was wrong.

"And cold," I rejoined; "looks as if we're in for an early winter."

"Bit previous to say that. I've known frost and snow in October and then a green winter. Fills the churchyards they say, don't they?"

I nodded.

"Bunkum that is, you know. I'll wager anyone who's a

sovereign to spare that more people die in a severe winter than in a mild one. These old saws and proverbs are mostly bunkum; just for the sake of the rhyme; a red sky at night is the sailor's delight, eh? Rot; I've seen more bad weather after a ruddy sunset than I've ever seen after a red dawn. Not that sailors care tuppence about the weather. What's the use? The only thing they bother about is grub. Study all the famous naval mutinies in history and you'll find the root's bad grub. And reasonable enough; give a man a skinful of good victuals and he can face anything, and *will*. What d'you say?"

"I should say you're right. But I'd have thought harsh and tyrannical treatment was equally as great a cause."

"Don't you believe it. People don't *know* they're being harshly treated if their bellies are well-lined. And as for tyranny aren't we all tyrannised over from the cradle to the grave and none the worse for it. Take a babe; what's its mother but a tyrant? what's a kid's teacher but a tyrant? a man's employer? a man's wife? and at the end nurse, doctor and undertaker are a trinity of tyrants to finish him off. Take no notice of tyrants."

"Your advice is a bit late in the day," I smiled; "I *had* to take notice of one and *from* him."

He grinned, drained his glass, told me to name mine and then said, "Got all high-stomached and hoity-toity, did you, and sauced the boss? Silly that."

"I'm inclined to agree with you. And I've had six months to think it over."

Again he made his odd, friendly grimace and then went on, "As bad as that? You don't look on the rocks, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I'm almost as near the rocks as makes no difference," I said, with difficulty keeping a self-pitying note from my voice.

He popped three or four small biscuits into his mouth, crunched them, took a drink and then, placing a hand on my

arm he prepared to unburden himself of his pet joke—for only so can I regard it in the light of subsequent experience. "You're a man of education," he said, swaying a little towards me but saving himself from an embrace at the last precarious second. I had not yet learned an adequate reply to such a charge and so remained silent. He seemingly needed no agreement on my part for he went on without a pause, "Why not make use of it?"

I was about to say that that was precisely what I had been doing for the last four years when he continued, "Turn your education into money, pour out what was poured into you, unload the stuffing for—for adequate remuneration; d'you follow me? as a school-schoolmaster."

The notion struck me as so grotesque that I laughed; at which he assumed an air of ludicrously portentous solemnity and giving himself a slight push-off from my chest regained an upright position for a moment and then leaned back against the bar counter from which position he regarded me with mild disapproval. He slowly pushed a small cube of cheese into his mouth and for some time appeared to have considerable difficulty in disposing of it; a gulp from his glass solved the problem and he continued, "Not joking, sir; quite serious; there are some of the snuggest little posts you could wish for in small private schools, believe me; I could name you a dozen off-hand if I'd time; most of them at healthy seaside towns, fine situation, good air, sandy soil, pure water and previous experience unnecessary for a man of education and good appearance; believe me; good food, congenial companionship, a cultured atmosphere, long holidays and the sons of impoverished gentlefolk as the material, ready to your hand, clay for the potter, wax for the—er—modeller; a noble profession; vicars on earth of the Creator in heaven." He filled his mouth with a fresh supply of biscuits and I was about to snatch that opportunity to bid him a quick good-night when the call of time enabled me to

break away less discourteously and in the general slow exodus I managed to lose him.

I had completely forgotten the incident long before I reached my attic and it was only a small coincidence that brought it back to my mind the next morning; had that not occurred I do not imagine I should ever have given his preposterous suggestion another thought. I had gone into the Camden Town Public Library to look at the situations vacant in *The Times* and *Telegraph* and as I turned over the pages of *The Telegraph* a heading caught my eye in the advertisement columns: *Hapjoy's Scholastic Agency* and as I read the announcement underneath, the scene in the bar of *The Horseshoe* the previous evening pictured itself very vividly in my mind. "We have," the announcement stated, "the best schools, private and public, on our lists; good posts guaranteed to suitable applicants; nominal registration fee; hours 10—4, Saturdays 10—12. Call or write: 23A Strand, W.C."

Without pausing for any consideration of the matter I determined to call at Hapjoy's. I returned to my lodgings, shaved, put on a clean shirt and collar and my school tie, rubbed a polish on to my shoes and set off for the Strand.

I reached the agency about a quarter to twelve. It was on the fifth floor and consisted apparently of only two rooms, in one of which I was interviewed by an elderly rather shabbily-dressed man with a ragged iron-grey beard, a mottled pulpy nose and steel-rimmed spectacles; his hands were dirty and his finger-nails were so horribly gnawed that each finger-end had the appearance of a nailless knob of flesh. Our conversation was conducted against a background of extraordinary noises from the adjoining room: the clatter of typewriters, the rattle of plates and the susurration of female voices interwoven by a deep rumbling bass.

"Any previous experience?" he asked.

"No."

"School?"

I did not know what he meant and seeing this he snapped, "What was your own school?"

"Allardyce's. This is their tie."

"Thank you. I'm aware of it. Any degrees or other qualifications?"

"I've passed the intermediate B.Sc. in economics of the London University."

"H'm. Games?"

I shook my head.

He pushed over a form. "Fill it in. Don't be long," looking up at the clock; "fraid we've nothing; but I'll see."

While I filled in the long form he busied himself with the ledger, looking over to me impatiently several times. When I had finished he took the form, glanced down it quickly and then placing one of his obscene fingertips on an entry in the open ledger he said, "You might suit Telfer's." As I said nothing to this he went on rapidly, "Telfer's Academy, Wingate-on-Sea, Kent coast; junior master; salary £50; London degree £55; Oxford or Cambridge £60. Well?"

"Is that—cr—quarterly?" I asked.

"Is it what?"

"Fifty pounds a quarter."

His straggling beard worked up and down spasmodically. "Per annum," he said shortly, "*per annum*."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Oh, all right."

"We'll write you," he said; "one guinea, please."

I stared at him in dismay. I possessed about thirty shillings all told and had brought but five shillings with me. I had not expected the "nominal registration fee" of the advertisement to be more than half a crown.

"You can book it, if you like," he went on; "but it'll be two guineas payable with the commission."

"I'll book it, then," I replied. "How much is the commission and when is it payable?"

He pushed over my form. "On the back," he said surlily.

But before I could read it he snatched it back as the clock on the wall began striking. "Twenty per cent. of salary," he said, "payable at end of first term. Good-morning."

A week later I received a letter from Telfer's Academy, Wingate-on-Sea, Kent, informing me that Mr. Hilary Telfer, F.R.G.S., was prepared to interview me at the Academy in the matter of my appointment as junior master at a salary of fifty pounds per annum, with board, lodging and laundry. My rail fare (third class) would be refunded. The next day I went down to Wingate, was interviewed by Mr. Telfer and appointed to the post. Asked when I could begin I replied "At once" and was told that I could take up my residence there and then or, if I wished to return to town to settle any business, I could be back in time to start the following Monday. I elected to stay, saying I would have my things sent on. I imagine that Telfer guessed these would not unduly burden the rail luggage-service, but I am sure he had no notion how closely I had run things for at that moment my worldly possessions were in cash twelve shillings and a few coppers and in kind the clothes I stood in; and the information that my fare would be refunded with my first quarter's salary came as a peculiarly unpleasant shock.

Had I gone straight to Telfer's Academy from my post on *The Financial Gazette* I am quite sure I should not have stayed a week; but six months of unsuccessful search for employment, with all its rebuffs and humiliations, upon a diet which during the latter months was chiefly biscuits and cheese and beer had considerably modified my self-assurance, tamed my temper and inspired me with a haunting fear of that utter destitution to which I had so nearly come. And so I endured Telfer and his Academy for two years; from twenty to twenty-two, two of the most valuable years of a young man's life; years in which he is beginning to find the uncertain ground of adolescence hardening and solidifying under his feet; years in which he is definitely passing into

manhood and acquiring the poise and balance, the self-knowledge and knowledge of his fellow men, by which he must judge and be judged for the remainder of his career. And those two extremely valuable formative years I spent, I wasted, flung away, under conditions which were I am sure as demoralising to the spirit and the mind (and, less shatteringly perhaps, to the body) as any that could be contrived for penal purposes. The thought farthest from my mind, the wish farthest from my heart, is to exaggerate those conditions and indeed I have no intention of giving other than a very brief account of these two years; probably the matter is largely personal and another man might have passed through two similar years unmarked save by boredom; I can even imagine there may be men who would have been quite contented, even moderately happy, at Telfer's; but then my imagination is fairly strong and even that has to give way to the reality of martyrs who have sung joyfully upon incandescent gridirons, in baths of boiling oil, from incinerating ovens, on the wheel and at the stake. It seems therefore that all experience is a personal matter and that the saw "one man's meat is another man's poison" has manifold applications and all equally true; certainly I found Telfer's poisonous, to the mind, the heart and the body.

First, but in this case not foremost, Wingate, despite its famed tonic air was a wretched hole, a small dirty town looking out at low tide over flats of muddy sand and at high over saffron-grey waters that bore no likeness to the azure of the posters advertising the town on the hoardings at Victoria Station. The people of Wingate struck me on first acquaintance as being boorish and uncouth, with barbarous accents and the staring brute eyes of sheep; and familiarity with them did not lead me to change or modify that first opinion.

The staff of Telfer Academy consisted of Mr. Hilary Telfer, whose F.R.G.S. impressed me until I discovered that it was a question of monetary subscription rather than of

geographical erudition; his wife Agnes who acted as Matron; his daughter Sybil who taught the little boys of six and seven; Halliday Cannon, a B.A. of Trinity College, Dublin, and myself. The domestic staff were a cook, two maids and a general utility man.

Hilary Telfer might have been Meakin's twin-brother except that he was sandyish where Meakin had been grey; he was that sandy type which seems sandy all over, variegated by sparse freckles, with a ropy neck and bony wrists; and he was mean and meagre in soul; he was not even a rat, for rats have pluck; it would indeed malign any beast to compare it with Telfer; he was unique, a nonpareil, a special creation; his age I never knew but I guessed it at fifty or so. Mrs. Telfer was a biggish woman, dark and fat with a rough red complexion which was seamed with minute cracks as if from some internal heat; she was amiable, good-natured and a shrewd manager; I imagined she was some years older than her husband. Sybil Telfer was in the early twenties; she was sandyish, not unpleasantly ugly, with a rather attractive smile and good teeth; she was alert, intelligent and appeared to handle her small boys very capably. Halliday Cannon was white-faced, hook-nosed, bald, with a drooping moustache and a large moist protruding underlip uncovering yellow irregular teeth; the only vestige of the former decent positions he had obviously held was his bibulousness which was indeed so obvious in his complexion and breath as to be a butt for the older boys' witicisms. He was a pathetically disrupted, broken and demoralised man and yet I could easily have got to like him, for he was easy-going and generous, with a witty tongue and a command of language I envied; but he repelled me physically; his habits were dirty and, not to mince matters, at times he smelt abominably. He hated Telfer with the ineffectual hatred of the broken and nerveless; on the few occasions when I could not avoid his confidences he assured me that one day he would kill him; tha-

pitiful vain boast was his sole comfort and support under insult and daily provocation.

Telfer was a stupid man; I cannot hope to describe his dull, crass, pig-headed stupidity; to attempt to combat it was to goad oneself into a blind fury of exasperation and at the end nothing was achieved except expense of spirit, for he was immovable. That he should have been in charge of fifty boys between the ages of six and fifteen was a criminal folly, for he was vicious and cruel in ways impossible except to a clod. The boys, who were all boarders, paid forty-five pounds a year, or sixty if they remained at the school for their holidays; since a dozen were orphans and a score of doubtful parentage this privilege was taken advantage of by the majority of the boys, and as Cannon's salary was only fifty-five pounds a year and the food supplied to the boys and the masters poor in quality and small in quantity, it will be obvious that Telfer Academy was a very snug little business. Cannon and I were supposed to take it in turns to remain at school during the holidays; but as neither of us had anywhere to go and next to nothing to spend, during my first year we both remained, and in the six weeks' summer holiday, Telfer and family being away, we managed to have a tolerably easy time. The second year, having saved most of my salary, I took a fortnight off during the summer six weeks.

If Telfer were a bad influence on the boys Cannon, for different reasons, could have been little better; and I was so fretted by my hatred of the place and everything connected with it and so obsessed by immediate grievances and my general feeling of being at odds with life and the victim of a raw deal from circumstance that I cannot beguile myself, even at this distance of time, with any notion that I helped to mitigate the dull wretched lot of the boys or indeed brought anything of worth or happiness into their lives. Mrs. Telfer and Sybil were the sole oases in that educational desert; they treated the boys, as far as was possible in view of the blank wall of prohibition often erected by Telfer, with kindness and con-

sideration; and Mrs. Telfer, especially, not only often stood between boys and punishment but made more positive contributions to their happiness in the matter of occasional culinary surprises and innovations and rarer concerts and parties. She never allowed any boy's birthday to pass without some small recognition of that dubious event, an extra pat of margarine for breakfast, a spoonful of jam or a wedge of cake for tea. There were quite a number of boys who did not know when their birthdays fell and upon these forlorn youngsters she bestowed the natal day of some famous man or other and in their cases the pat of margarine, the spoonful of jam, the wedge of cake, were a little larger.

Cannon and I ate with the boys and had the same food. There were three tables in the refectory, two running parallel down the centre of the room with Cannon at the head of one and I the other; and the third on a dais crossing the two like the top stroke of a capital T. At this raised table the Telfers fed, except on Sundays, when they took their meals in a small adjoining dining-room, to which Cannon and I were invited in turn to share the midday meal; and those fortnightly repasts were the only square meals I ever had at Telfer's.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Telfers for six days each week *sat and gorged under our very noses* (how apt that phrase is and how tormented those noses were by the savoury odours wafting from the dais!); Telfer especially did himself well and applied himself no less assiduously to his wine than to his food.

That I might have ameliorated my condition in the matter of food, as in all other matters, became quickly apparent within a few months of my arrival, for Sybil Telfer made it plain that I had, to state it very moderately, found favour in her eyes, a favour which her mother was ready to support ardently and her father not at any rate to resent, or to hinder its progress. But unluckily Sybil made no appeal to me and although for the sake of the fleshpots I played for some time with the notion of acting the part of a lover I abandoned

it, not because it seemed an unworthy action on my part (I would have cheerfully committed worse crimes for the sake of the bodily comforts or to get even with Telfer), but because it seemed a wretched trick to play upon Sybil, whom I liked, and, I suppose, respected. She certainly bore me no ill-will for my unresponsiveness to her frank advances and indeed I frequently suspected her hand in the few amenities which came my way.

The older boys at times beguiled the wretchedness and tedium of their days in ways which may be left to the imagination. Telfer ignored these familiar manifestations of unemployed, unsatisfied, unhappy and disconsolate puberty until some particular grossness forced itself upon his notice, when he worked himself into a frenzy of disgust and reprobation and thrashed with an abandon of self-control that was horrifying. At Allardyce's there had been a tradition of severe corporal punishment but it was conducted in public with an almost ritual solemnity which rendered it void of much of its offence to the onlookers, however harmful it may have been to lictor and victim. But Telfer thrashed, for major violations of the code, in the privacy of his study. I was present at one of these demonstrations as the ten-year-old culprit had cited me in his defence. The charge was stealing and the verdict barely waited upon the end of the tearful plea, nor was my evidence of previous good behaviour listened to. Telfer ordered the boy to strip. He was a fat ten-year-old. Most of the boys at Telfers were fat and by the fact that I myself put on over a stone and a half while there I conclude that a diet consisting chiefly of white bread, margarine and stews is guaranteed to put rounded curves upon the skinniest, whatever the quality of the material beneath the curves. The boy, having stripped, Telfer lifted him slowly, one might almost say lovingly, over his knee, disposed the body and limbs conveniently, and proceeded to lay on the stripes with a supple cane of, I should guess, exquisitely tormenting efficiency. I had expected half a dozen stripes, or

a dozen at the most, but the punishment went on and on until the boy's screams had died away to a sobbing moan and Telfer was sweating and livid from his violence. I should, of course, have interfered; should have taken the cane and thrashed Telfer; should have knocked him down; it would have been child's play to me; but I did nothing; I endured it shamefully until the end and then carried the outraged, half-fainting brat to his bedroom, where he remained the rest of the day upon bread and water. I endured it, I say, as I endured all the other things at Telfer's. Why? I was young and strong and healthy, passionate, hot-tempered, impatient of restraint or control and I endured conditions for myself and for others which should have roused a poltroon to protest and to action. Again I ask why? Frankly I don't know; unless it were that the six months during which I daily drew nearer and nearer to destitution had so scared me, demoralised me, that I was ready to put up with any humiliation, any tyranny, any beastliness, rather than risk a recurrence of that nightmare. A poor and weak and quibbling explanation? Perhaps; I refuse to submit to judgment, except at the hands of those who have been similarly brought so close, so frighteningly close, to that border-line beyond which lies that territory of the lost, that no-man's-land of the outcast, of the man and woman for whom there is no place in the workaday world, whose brains and hands were not required, who have dropped out of the great busy army which marches on without them, with, of necessity, no further thought or care for them than Napoleon's *Grand Armée* bestowed upon the stragglers and the fallen who strewed the snow of Russia.

But the day came when I made my protest and accepted the inevitable consequence. But I can lay claim to no merit for my action, for a lucky chance had rendered me, at least for a time, invulnerable to the menace of unemployment. There were three terms and we were paid at the end of each, and I had just received my cheque for sixteen pounds odd. It was a Saturday half-holiday and I was not on duty.

I determined to go to Polkeston Races, in itself a crime in Telfer's eyes. I do not think I went with any intention of betting, certainly not heavily, for I took only four pounds with me. I had never put money on a horse before and this was my first attendance at a racecourse. The affair may then legitimately be ascribed to novice's luck.

Before, during and immediately after the first race I did little else but watch the bookmakers and the press of people about them and I might have remained the whole afternoon content with that amazingly fascinating pastime had there not been running in the second race a horse named Hayter's Pride. The name Hayter, of course, caught my eye and it seemed to me an odd coincidence (I did not know then how many thousands of pounds had been lost by just such odd coincidences), odd enough in fact to be worth risking something on. I approached a bookmaker whose voice was less alarmingly vociferous than those of his neighbours and cast a nervous glance at his blackboard. I find it amusing now to remember how timid, almost scared I felt, how difficult I found it to avoid the sense that I was committing a crime. There on the board was Hayter's Pride and against it the figures 20 to 1. If I chanced five shillings on it and won that would be a fiver. Could money be made so easily! I hesitated and as I did so the bookmaker rubbed out the figures and obedient to some incomprehensible remark dropped from the extreme corner of his clerk's mouth, altered the figures to 15 to 1. Almost angrily, as if the fellow had just stolen twenty-five shillings from me, I pushed towards him and said "Five shillings on Hayter's Pride." He did not look at me but with a sweep of a moist thumb obliterated the figures and rewrote 10 to 1 and with the same thumb directed my attention to his colleague as he dropped my two coins into his bag. The clerk gave me a ticket, wrote in his book, and I drifted away to wait for my fifty-five shillings. Ten minutes later I noticed that Hayter's Pride was back to 20 to 1 and cursed my haste; but in the end the colt started at 7

to 1, so that when I drew my winnings (for it led all the way and won by a street) I was able to congratulate myself upon making up my mind at the right moment.

I lost ten shillings on each of the next two races but won thirty on the fourth and then, in a mood of recklessness, I decided to put all my winnings on a horse in the last race. I ran my eyes down the card but there was no name that struck any familiar chord in my memory or seemed in any way to promise a fortune. And then a piece of incredible ignorance put over forty pounds into my pocket and, I sincerely believe, changed the whole course of my life. Someone had dropped a newspaper, open at the sporting page, and I picked it up thinking that perhaps I might find a tip. I noticed the list of probable starters for the last race (there were nine) and against the name of one, Old Moore, were the figures 000. I puzzled over these and finally concluded they meant that Old Moore had not run before; this was his day of initiation, as it was mine. Good luck to him then! I would back him. I did at 100 to 7 and he squeezed home by a nose to an almost beast-like roar of howls and cheers from the crowd.

With my term's salary I had now nearly sixty pounds in cash and there was my savings of two years, a sum of over thirty pounds, in the bank. It was this, and this alone, which inspired my protest. I wish I could pretend that this protest was directed against some outstanding violation of the rights of men (or boys), against some offensive piece of tyranny peculiar to Telfer; that it was a blow struck for the decencies of life against its outrages; unhappily it was no such magnificent affair, being of no greater import than a bad egg, or more precisely six bad eggs—that is to say six in the witness-box and an indefinite number waiting in support. Eggs were on the dietary at Telfer's and accordingly, on four Sundays during the year (by whom and how these festal days were chosen I never learned), a boiled egg appeared

for each boy at breakfast and two each for Cannon and myself. It so chanced that the day following my amazing luck at Polkeston Races was one of these festival Sundays. My first egg was bad, offensively so; my second was little better; I glanced round my table and from the screwed-up faces of disgust gathered that few of the boys had won a prize in the prandial lottery. I abruptly decided upon action; not dignified action; not a calm correct protest; nothing of that sort; but a clownish piece of vulgar horseplay. I can, of course, describe the affair differently; can say that I had already decided to leave Telfer's and wanted to make my going a spectacular one. But descriptions or ascriptions are of little importance compared with action. I gathered up six eggs, including my own two, and carrying them with the bottom of one as a stopper for another I left the refectory and made my way to Telfer's small dining-room where he would be breakfasting *en famille* upon viands the very thoughts of which made my mouth water and my stomach gnaw. Reaching the door I knocked, first carefully depositing my eggs upon a small stand that stood outside. Telfer's reedy tones called out testily for me to enter; but I contented myself with opening the door and intruding my head. Telfer gaped at this schoolboyish piece of idiocy and his wife and Sybil stared with surprise and, it seemed to me, a sort of scared dismay.

"What d'you want, sir?" Telfer snapped.

"Telfer," I said, with as maddening a grin and in as offensive a tone as I could muster, "Your eggs are bad; the refectory stinks with them."

I wonder to this day what he saw in my eyes; plainly it was something disturbing, alarming. He attempted placation. "I'm sorry, Mr. Carden; it shall be attended to. I'll see you as soon as I've breakfasted. I am sorry really; can't understand how it happened."

But I had already burnt all my boats in my own mind and was in no mood for a truce. "Can't understand it!" I shouted; "D'you doubt my word? Try this one!" and

snatching an egg from the stand I tossed it over to him so that it fell on to the table and spattered its noisome contents far and wide. He said nothing to this outrage but again his mouth gaped; I heard a little gasp from one of the women; but I was paying them no heed. "And these, Telfer!" I laughed; and one by one hurled them at him and then, slamming the door, passed back through the refectory, where every eye was turned upon me in amazement and devouring inquisitiveness, and made my way up to my bedroom to pack up my few things.

It was a silly piece of childish temper and self-assertion and due to similar causes. In looking back upon it I can discover no single cause for satisfaction: I did not even with my six shots score a hit on the abhorred Telfer. And yet it was the occasion of my manumission from a degrading and humiliating servitude and I came back to London no longer a boy but a man of twenty-two with a capital of nearly ninety pounds and a determination that it would be a more decent thing to die than ever again to endure such degrading conditions.

CHAPTER IV

UNCLE FRED

I took a comfortable bed-sitting-room in the Euston Road, but decided to get all my meals out, as this would give me more freedom to go far afield in my search for a suitable post. I renewed my wardrobe, which had become sadly frayed at Telfer's, and set myself to spy out the land before making any definite move towards my object. I reckoned on considerable difficulties in my quest, but I had sufficient capital to last me the major portion of a year and I felt that nothing was to be gained by hastiness. I was, for a change, to be pleasantly surprised. Instead of a repetition of the former six months' fruitless search for a post I was able to pick and choose and within a period of eight weeks was offered and refused no fewer than seven quite moderately remunerative posts. I can think of no adequate explanation of this *volte face* on the part of fortune. I had still no references and it was certainly no lack of competition, for there was quite a small host of applicants for these vacancies; and yet I could have had any of them. It is true that Kelsey was dead; I heard that within a fortnight of my return to London; but unless it were a fact that he had previously used all his undoubted influence to thwart me his death cannot be the real explanation; and it is surely unthinkable that he would have gone to so much trouble to crush so small a fly as I was then. The alternative explanation smacks of conceit but it is the more plausible of the two: I was a big, upstanding and intelligent-looking young man and more, I imagine, to the point I was exceedingly well turned-out. I looked prosperous; even my twenty-odd pounds of fat acquired at Telfer's

merely added to that appearance of sleek, groomed prosperity, Be the explanation what it may I found, as I have said, a number of very congenial posts open to me. I refused them one after another; I got into the habit of refusing them; I had, I suppose, an odd egotistical notion at the back of my mind that somewhere or other the perfect post was waiting for me and that presently I should drop into it. And sure enough after nearly three months it came along, or what indeed looked very like it. And it came through Dr. James, the head master of Allardyce's. I had written to him as soon as I was back in town, giving him a brief summary (somewhat rosily tinted) of my career since leaving school and saying that I was determined to strike higher and should be grateful if he would bear me in mind if anything came to his notice. He replied saying he would certainly help me if the opportunity offered, and he was as good as his word, for in the middle of June (it was just before he was going off for a long holiday on the continent) he wrote to me saying that Mr. Abner Trefusis, the well-known historian, needed an assistant to do research work for him in the British Museum and Bodleian Libraries and elsewhere and that he had strongly recommended me for the post. He instructed me to ring up Mr. Trefusis and make an appointment. I did so, and two mornings later went along to 3A Marlborough Crescent, Mayfair, to interview the great man. He was a tiny man but appeared to find my bulk by no means a drawback. He invited me to stay to lunch and during the long, slow, but very satisfactory meal he talked to me as if I were already a fellow-worker and an old crony into the bargain, discussing his previous books, of which I knew nothing except a few titles I had memorised, and his future plans, of which naturally I was ignorant. And before I went, after a couple of glasses of port which were a revelation to me, and a cigar which added the last touch of luxury, he formally offered me the post. While the work kept me in London I was to live at Marlborough Crescent and my salary

would be three guineas a week; when it was necessary for me to be out of town all my travelling expenses and my board and lodging would be paid; and the work would probably last a twelvemonth. He would not allow me to decide then and there but said I was to think it over in all its aspects and let him know within a week. "Take a full week," he said, with a pursed-up amiable little smile and an encouraging pat upon my shoulder, "and not a day less." It seemed to me an odd stipulation when it must have been plain from my manner that I was overjoyed at such a chance and ready and eager to jump at it.

Nevertheless, within forty-eight hours I had written to him refusing his offer and to this day I am completely at a loss to explain the decision I took so abruptly the afternoon of the day following my interview with him. Possibly the really extraordinary coincidence which brought about my meeting with Uncle Fred unconsciously swayed my judgment.

The next morning, with so pleasant and remunerative a post in my pocket as it were, I did not get up till after nine, breakfasted slowly and satisfactorily in a restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road and spent the rest of the morning strolling about the West End, finishing up with an expensive luncheon at *The Savoy* and for the first time in my life drank with it a whole bottle of white wine. It was hock, which I had never drunk before, and I can see the label now, a castle on the summit of a tree-covered hill encircled by the words Durkheimer Feuerberg. The waiter told me it was 1890 vintage (it was then the year 1898) and added "a fine year, sir, as you know." I nodded as if the whole lore of vintnery were an open book to me.

I left *The Savoy* about three o'clock, slightly drunk (if so gross a word must designate the intensely happy exalted feeling that caressed my body and glowed in my mind). I wandered along the Strand for some time looking at the shops and then, my head swimming a little and the herald of a headache beginning to tap at my consciousness, I de-

cided to go for a ride on the top of a 'bus; they were all horse-buses then, the motor-'bus being still a lustrum away. I hailed the first one that came along. Its destination board was marked Finsbury Park. I had never heard of it before, had no notion at all where it was and simply said to the conductor "All the way," with the intention of returning by the same 'bus. But when, without mishap, we reached Finsbury Park about five o'clock my headache was occupying most of my attention and I alighted and went into an A.B.C. for a pot of strong tea. I sat down at the marble-topped table and gave my order to a very pretty waitress. Even in that matter chance seemed to play its part, for had the girl not been pretty and with a delightfully trim figure, my glance would not have followed her appreciatively down the length of the room until she disappeared, nor, stopping short at that distant table, whence she had vanished, have immediately recognised the man sitting there as my Uncle Fred. I had not seen him for eight years, but there was no mistaking his fine ruddy face, heavy moustache, dark thick hair, sombre clothes with a rose in his buttonhole, and burly figure, although, as I noticed when presently I went along to his table, he was by no means so tall as he had seemed in my boyhood. When the waitress returned with my tray I asked her if she would take it to the table down the room, indicating where my uncle was sitting; and following her I was able to catch his look of surprise as his glance swept up at me and then fell again to his plate of buttered toast. It was a glance not of recognition but of surprise and mild annoyance at a stranger's intrusion. I sat down, poured out a cup of tea, lit a cigarette and waited for the inevitable moment when he would look up at me again. I had to wait some time but at last it came and once again his glance swept my face and was about to fall when I smiled at him. His glance became a stare of amazement. "Don't you know me?" I asked. He remained silent, puzzled, almost suspicious and then suddenly his face cleared, broke up into a crinkling smile and

his big hand shot across the table, "Why, bless my soul, Richard!" he said, so loudly and vehemently that for a long moment we became the object of faintly inquisitive and amused stares. I grasped his hand. "I knew you at once, Uncle," I said; "You've not changed at all. Look younger than ever in fact."

"I'm fifty, my boy," he smiled. "Can't say you haven't changed. You're a fine fellow. Your father would have been proud of you."

I doubted this very much but made no comment. My uncle pushed a finger of toast into his mouth and again smiled over at me. It was quite true that he seemed younger than my boyish recollection of him and in his healthy, ruddy, handsome face I could see no trace of likeness to my mother, whose younger brother he was.

"You don't live at Finsbury Park, Uncle, do you?" I asked.

"Finsbury Park? Good Lord, no! First time I've ever been here. Just popped over on business and am off in a few minutes. We're still living at Maryfields."

"And how's business?" I asked, and suddenly to my amused dismay, I realised that I did not know what my uncle's business was. I knew he kept a shop and had a hazy recollection that he sold medicines and was probably a chemist but I decided to wait for a clue.

"Pretty good, my boy. In fact, I think I may say *very* good indeed. And how are you doing? You're looking prosperous if you don't mind my saying so."

"All in the window," I laughed; "I'm out of a job at present."

"Sorry to hear that." I noticed an odd expression come into his face as if he had suddenly been visited by an idea and was rapidly weighing the pros and cons before mentioning it. Before he could speak I said, "Oh, it's not as bad as it sounds. I've got a post to go to next week if I care to take it. I've not yet decided." Why I said that I don't know,

for I had certainly decided to accept Trefusis's offer, had decided in fact the moment it was made. And yet somehow or other I felt that I was speaking the truth when I said that I was undecided.

"What sort of work are you doing?" my uncle asked, still with the same cogitative expression.

"Well, I've done a number of things since I left school, and this job is new; it's research work in history for Mr. Abner Trefusis; ever heard of him?" My uncle shook his head and I went on, "He's an historian; quite a famous one and has published a number of well-known history books, mostly about the Tudors, I believe."

My uncle nodded. "Think you'll like it?" he asked.

I laughed. "I fancy I shall; the work isn't hard and the pay's good, and anyhow it'll be an improvement on what I've been doing the last two years."

My uncle showed no curiosity; indeed he hardly appeared to be listening, so preoccupied was he with his own thoughts. It occurred to me that I had not inquired about Aunt Alice or Cousin May, and I was on the point of apologising for my forgetfulness when he seemed to come to an abrupt decision. He pushed his empty plate away from him and bending forward a little said very earnestly, "Listen to me, my boy; I've a proposal to make to you; but hear me out before you say anything. By the way, you know what my business is?"

I plunged. "A chemist's, isn't it?"

"God forbid!" he replied and then, with a chuckle, "say a poisoner and have done with it. I'm a herbalist; that mean anything to you?"

I smiled and shook my head. "Tobacco's the only herb I know and—er—hops if they're herbs."

"Tobacco, eh? a deadly poison," smiling pleasantly; "but that's neither here nor there. Well, I'm a herbalist and in quite a big way. I've a large shop in Angel Lane, Mary-fields, and if I may say so a reputation that extends considerably beyond that not very salubrious suburb."

I was on the point of saying "A reputation for what?" when, as if he guessed my thought, he went on, "You see, my boy, I not only sell herbs and medicines made from them, as well as herbal soaps, cosmetics, washes, tonics and so on, but the people come to me with their own and their children's ailments and I prescribe for them and so successfully that, as I say, my reputation is high and far-reaching. But of course my prescriptions are successful for I prescribe herbs and not drugs. Herbs are nature's cures and drugs are the devil's mockeries. In the whole range of the British Pharmacopæia there is not one single curative drug; they are all mere alleviants; but herbs can and do cure, as my twenty-eight years' practice in one of the poorest quarters of London has demonstrated over and over again. I have cured more human ills than all the doctors and chemists in East London put together—cured? pah! a misnomer as far as they're concerned. You will guess, my boy, that I'm not altogether popular with the fraternities of drug-sellers and lancet-wielders. You'll have guessed right. If they could do me a bad turn or put me in an awkward corner they'd be delighted. Obviously. And I've to be careful. Careful's not the word! I've to watch everything I say and do as if I were in the witness-box on oath. And accidents will happen. The trouble is, of course, that I've no diplomas of any sort; I'm not even a member of the Pharmaceutical Society and while the law permits me to prescribe herbal remedies and to sell them and all other herbal hygienic requisities it keeps a wary eye upon me, I assure you, holds a sort of watching brief for the rascals I'm talking about, chemists and doctors who spend their lives poisoning and mutilating their fellow human beings. That is the fly in my ointment, my boy, my lack of a diploma which would be a protective armour against the assaults of scoundrels if—er—anything unfortunate did happen. You see what I mean?"

"I think so."

"I hope you'll see more presently. Well, my boy, I imagine

you're asking why I don't get a diploma and I reply : What? at fifty? and I add that I have always been a complete duffer at books and have never passed an examination in my life. Nature is the one book I can read and understand and could pass an examination in, but such examinations are not set in this asinine world and there are no diplomas given for a knowledge of Nature's healing art, the art and science of herbs. But, and it is a very important but and one I want you to give your attention to, there's no reason why I shouldn't get what I might call a sort of proxy diploma, only that's not quite the word; there is a word for what I'm driving at but I've forgotten it if I ever knew it; but you see what I mean?"

"I'm not sure I do."

"No? Well, you see it's this way : if I had in the business someone who held a diploma, not a medical one but just one in' pharmacy, why then, you see, my boy, I'd be covered in case of—er—accidents; d'you follow me?"

"I see what you mean but I don't see how you'd be covered or *need* covering for that matter. You say the law permits you to prescribe and sell herbal medicines, and as you don't deal in drugs how can you fall foul of anybody?"

"Looks impossible, doesn't it?" observed my uncle pleasantly, leaning back in his chair and tapping on the table with his finger-tips. "Well, it's not as simple as it sounds. The chemists and doctors are jealous of my success; now supposing I prescribe something for a w—— for a child, we'll say, a simple herbal remedy when that child's already too far gone to benefit; it dies; there's an inquest; doctor comes forward and says if the child had been brought to him etcetera, etcetera, you see? But if I'd a fully qualified chemist in the shop no doctor would dare meddle lest it turned out that my chemist had given the poor brat the very drug the doctor was accustomed to prescribe for the complaint; you see? They've been backing each other up for generations and one daren't rat on the other now."

"It sounds all right," I smiled; "but would you get a qualified chemist to serve in a herbalist's shop?"

My uncle nodded his head slowly backwards and forwards. "Certainly, my boy, certainly; especially if," he paused and regarded me searchingly, "he were one of the family as you might say; yourself, for example."

I laughed. "Unfortunately a diploma in pharmacy doesn't happen to be among my assets."

"But it could be added to them, eh? You're a clever chap; you did well at school? prizes for no end of things and matriculated, didn't you?"

"Oh, as for that," I said, "I've also passed the intermediate examination for a science degree in economics."

"Splendid; a diploma in pharmacy would be child's play to you; do it in a year or two at the outside; what d'you say?"

"Thanks, Uncle, but really—"

"Just a minute; let's have everything clear and shipshape. Listen first to what I'm offering before you decide."

"Go ahead, then."

"You'll live with us, there's a fine big bed-sitting-room going spare, more than one for that matter, and help during part of the day in the shop; the other part of the day you'll devote to study for this diploma I'm talking about, and you'd have to attend classes, I expect, wouldn't you?"

I nodded. "London University as an external student; lectures all held during the evenings."

"Capital!" rubbing his hands together so delightedly that I'd not the heart just then to say I'd not the remotest notion of falling in with his precious plan. "Capital, my boy; Now, salary, eh? Well, while you were working for your diploma I'd give you two guineas a week and of course you'd be having free board, lodging, washing and all domestic comforts, and you've only to look at me to assure yourself that your aunt knows what a man likes to eat and how to cook it."

"I'm to have three guineas with full board and lodgings where I'm going, Uncle."

My uncle's face fell a moment and then he went on eagerly, "But is it a permanency, my boy, eh? is it a permanency? What are the future prospects?"

"Well, it's certainly not that, Uncle; it's for only a year but I imagine it will lead to other things."

"Ah, these other things! these maybes in the future; these perhapses! Now wait a bit. I'll say two and a half guineas while you're working for your diploma and then after you've got it four! how's that? Just a minute! and later on why not a partnership? What d'you think of that?"

And suddenly I began to think a very great deal of it and it came into my head that *this* perhaps was the ideal job I'd been waiting for; and just as suddenly there invaded my mind, as if in support of this notion, the recollection of the really extraordinary coincidence which had brought about this meeting. Neither Uncle Fred nor I had ever before been to Finsbury Park and there were a hundred other equally odd if small circumstances which had caused our meeting; why, it was a million to one chance, quite that; and million to one chances are no everyday occurrences and when they happen must surely mean something. So I reasoned while my uncle sat watching me, still with a smile upon his face, but just not able to hide completely his anxiety. I returned his smile, my mind made up. But I temporised for a moment. "But what use should I be in your shop, Uncle? I know nothing about herbs and might poison someone."

"Don't let that worry you, my boy; I should be always there at your elbow. And as for knowing nothing about herbs you'll soon learn. Oh, don't think I'm going to ask you to add that to your other studies; by no means; but, my boy, you'll *want* to know all about herbs as soon as you begin to discover their value to humanity; you'll *demand* to know; believe me."

"I'm afraid you overestimate my zest for knowledge," I

smiled. "But assuming, just for the sake of argument, that I accept your offer you might not find me a congenial lodger."

"Don't say lodger, my boy; don't—"

"But I *do* say lodger, Uncle, and that's just the crux of the matter. My habits and ways of life are probably quite different from your own; I think it altogether likely you'd disapprove of them; I smoke, you know, and I'm fond of a glass and then—"

"Pooh! my boy," with a wave of his hand; "do I look that sort of man? Now I ask you? Do I look a sour-faced bigot, a—"

"Well, no; but it's not always wise to judge by appearance and then there's Aunt Al—"

Again he waved his hand. "You'll be as free to live your own life in your own way, my boy," he said, speaking very earnestly, "as you would be if you were in your own house. You can have your meals in your own room if you like and outside your hours in the shop can come and go as you please; no one will interfere with you, I assure you, least of all your Aunt Alice; she's a woman in a thousand and is well aware that a man reckons nose-poking and interfering as bad almost as infidelity; as for your Cousin May, she's at business all day, she's a secretary in the A.S.T. and—"

"A.S.T.?" I asked.

"That's it. Amalgamated Society of Teachers. Up in Montague Square in the City. A good post. Draws her three pounds ten a week and only six-and-twenty. Leaves home at eight and is not back till after six. So *she* won't get in your way. Now then, my boy, what d'you say? Two and a half guineas a week, a free hand, no interference, board, lodging, washing and all creature comforts and in the offing, as you might say, a partnership; now then?"

I nodded. "Right, Uncle, I'll take it."

"Capital, my boy! shake on it!" his big hand shot over the table again and grasped mine effusively. "When can you come? Much furniture or baggage?"

"Nothing except a few books and clothes. I *could* come along to-morrow but we'll say the day after, if that's all right for you."

"Splendid. Come in time for dinner, and you'll see what your Aunt can do in the way of feeding the brute, eh? We have dinner at one o'clock, but if you're used to something hot in the evening you can have it; May always has a hot meal when she gets home in the evening. And if you take ale with your meals there's an off-licence just opposite. Know Mary-fields?"

"Just about heard of it, Uncle, and that's all. I'd nearly forgotten you lived there till you reminded me."

He fished out a card and handed it to me. On it was Frederick Rayner, Herbalist, and in the corner, 16 Angel Lane, Maryfields, and below 'Phone Maryfields 2244. I glanced at it and pushed it into my waistcoat pocket and as I did so my uncle looked over at the clock and said "By George! I must hurry; train goes in ten minutes; your aunt will be delighted at the news, my boy, delighted; you can get a 'bus, from Liverpool Street direct to Maryfields; Nos. 22 and 26 pass the end of Angel Lane; you can't miss it; it's just past the Town Hall and opposite the fire-station." He picked up an attaché case and his hat from under his chair, grasped my hand and shook it once more and, with a final nod and a smile, went striding rapidly up the room to the door.

I came upon Maryfields almost with the sensations of a first visit to a foreign country; there was the same mingling of familiar and unfamiliar; the same striking similitudes and equally striking contrasts; the same strange dark faces and brightly-coloured clothes; the same babble of an unknown tongue. The 'bus came swaying and rumbling out of the narrow street leading from the City and then at the Aldgate Pump the street widened and for miles ran broad and straight, flanked by shops bearing on their facias outlandish names, crowded with shabby stalls at which black hairy men

and fat comfortable women chaffered and haggled while swarms of children with dark flower-like faces played queer games upon the littered pavements, or danced about a barrel-organ with an enchanting grace that stirred the heart with sudden beauty. Farther on the street again narrowed, the outlandish names grew less frequent, the stalls vanished, to return again presently when once more the thoroughfare widened into Maryfields High Street, with its railway viaduct, its towering Town Hall, glittering fire-station, public-houses, furniture stores, cheap eating-houses, 'buses, trams, (there was still a horse-tram running then) and its busy, jostling, hurrying poorly-dressed multitudes. Predominantly British as these multitudes were there was a speckle of yellow and black skins and more than a liberal sprinkling of that vital race which having long ago burst the confines of its own nationality has permeated all other nations, now serving mankind with a queer shiftily suspicious humility, now dominating it with magnificent imperiousness, hating it, placating it, commanding it, that strange sad unquiet outcast race of helots that rules the earth by proxy.

That long varigated thoroughfare from the City to Maryfields was to become almost intimately familiar to me during the two following years; but of all its ugliness, its squalor, its poverty, its strange beauty, its dirt, its warm humanity, what moved me and fascinated me most was its children, with their dark, flower-like faces, who swarmed about the pavements. It was strange the delight I took in watching those ragged and dirty youngsters, for I was not interested in children; or rather I suppose I was as indifferent to them as are most normal young men; they represented a stage I had passed through and outgrown and were therefore no longer of any significance in my life; all my two years at Telfer's had done was to tend to alter that natural indifference to an unnatural dislike, so that from being a quite negligible part of life they assumed an importance that was strictly proportional to their power of being a damnable nuisance. And yet,

for some unfathomable reason, those unwashed brats of the pavements suddenly touched me with a sense of beauty and so stirred my imagination that I hammered out some rhymed lines about them and sent them to some periodical or other whose editor very properly returned them. If ever there were a bad poem it was surely that sole attempt of mine; even as verse (the technique of which any donkey can master) it was poor; and yet it did succeed in describing something of the entrancing kaleidoscope of the long road; did, I fancy, manage to capture a little of the exotic charm of these dancing children. It is not, then, vanity which leads me to write it here but a quiet sincere feeling that it did, however inadequately, succeed in describing something of the effect upon me of that emotional experience (for such it was) and in words which, by reason of their choice at the time when it was all fresh in my mind, are apter and truer than any I should now use; but, more significant to the purpose of this story, I believe the feeling which inspired those poor verses went far deeper than I suspected and played some not inconsiderable part in my emotional life both in its immediate and more distant future. But enough of such egotistical surmise; perhaps after all it is vanity and I put the poem here because I thought it good then and because I cannot even now believe it as bad as the editor of that forgotten periodical considered it.

THE ROAD OF ROMANCE

*The women of the Mile End Road
Are large and comfortable;
Laughter and living and content
Have paid their debt in full.
But the children of the Mile End Road
Their faces are dark flowers:
The children of the pavement
Blossom in dusty bowers.*

*The men along the Mile End Road
Are hairy, black and slow;
They thread their ways like drifting motes
Where the swaying 'buses go.
But the children of the pavement
Are like a story told:
The children of the Mile End Road
Are flowers of dusky gold.*

*The pavements of the Mile End Road
Are littered with dead days;
The gutters and the fretting stones
Are soiled with patterned greys.
But the children of the pavement
Flicker from place to place,
And each one is a dream of old
With a flame-dark face.*

*The windows of the Mile End Road
Have harvested the earth;
The painted names upon the shops
Clamour for money's worth.
But the children by the windows
(Where the world's for sale or hire),
The children of the Mile End Road
They burn like flowers of fire.*

If that be a fair and true picture of that long road leading from the City to Maryfields then that same picture in miniature may well represent Angel Lane where stood my Uncle Fred's shop, the biggest one, not that that was saying much, of all that short straggling street, so narrow that vehicles of any size could only pass each other by mounting the pavement with their near-side wheels to the peril of the bare feet of the children at play. Angel Lane was all shops and the shopkeepers lived behind and above them. Lock-up shops there

were none, but whether because of the reason given me by one of the three grocers of Angel Lane I don't know. "Lock up your shop and leave it for the night," he said, "and what happens? Ask a policeman. And," with a grimace which represented the libellous opinion of the neighbourhood, "don't ask too often if you want to keep healthy. Live on the premises and you know what's going on, and you're there to see it *don't*. See?"

No. 16 Angel Lane, whose facia bore the words in large gold cursive lettering, F. Rayner, Herbalist, was not only the largest shop in that small street, but by far the largest house, as it was also the oldest. I had gathered from my uncle that there were plenty of spare rooms, and this was no more than the truth; there were, in fact, three which were never used at all during the time I lived there; they were unfurnished, and it was, I fancy, this lack of extra furniture which limited the accommodation offered me to a single room; but it was a very large one with huge windows and, with a curtain across the middle, made a tolerably sized bedroom and quite a comfortable sitting-room. It was not that my uncle could not afford to buy furniture for the vacant rooms (the business was, in fact, as he had said, a very prosperous one), but it was a foible of his to be close-fisted over expenditure on such things, just as my aunt hated to spend money on domestic help, preferring to do the work herself with the occasional help of a charwoman.

But No. 16 Angel Lane possessed something far more startling than mere bigness to mark it off from its neighbours; something, indeed, so extraordinary in such surroundings as to be the most significant thing about it or, more truly, about its occupants—a garden; not, indeed, a large garden, but one of the loveliest I had seen; one that in such a foul spot as Angel Lane plainly signified the existence of someone to whom a garden was a living thing to be tended and handled and caressed with all the loving care bestowed upon an only child. When I first looked out of the dining-room window on

to that garden of flowers (it was the month of June) I remembered that the few times I had seen my Uncle Fred he had worn a button-hole and he had worn it not as other men, carelessly or self-consciously or half-ashamed, but, plain even to boyish eyes, as a knight must have worn the gage of his lady. Flowers, indeed, were his love, his passion, and it always seemed to me when I became familiar with his ways that he devoted to them most of that emotional capital which other men spend upon human beings or, somewhat lower in the scale, horses and dogs. It was not a herbal garden, nor was there a vegetable, a fruit-bush or a fruit tree in it; it was a flower-garden, a garden made by a man to whom flowers stand for the romance, the wonder and all the lovely things of life; herbs were his business and they had no part in that magical kingdom of his leisure hours.

I arrived on my first day, as Uncle Fred had suggested, in time for dinner, and was warmly welcomed by my aunt, a stout, smiling little woman with mouse-coloured hair, a rather soft, faded voice, and what, I fear, I stigmatised then and there as a vulgar accent; she was indeed, by my snobbish standard, an illiterate woman, and by any standard, certainly not an educated one. But she was capable, good-tempered, healthy, infinitely patient and understanding and, very much to the point for one so fond of good food as I was, a fine cook. That first meal struck me as a good augury of future gustatory satisfactions, although I made the reservation that she was on her mettle and giving of her very best and that so high a culinary watermark would not often be reached; but there I was mistaken; while at 16 Angel Lane I lived, in the proverbial phrase, like a fighting cock. For that inaugural meal there were English lamb-chops, peas and new potatoes, a sweet omelette, strawberries and cream and black coffee. The chops were for me; my uncle, aunt and cousin were all three vegetarians. I noticed that I had a small coffee pot to myself, my uncle and aunt using a larger one, and catching my glance, my uncle explained that they preferred coffee

made from the root of dandelion, but they did not expect me to share that odd taste. There was also a jug of ale for me; it held quite a quart, which I finished gratefully enough, but pointed out that a pint was ample for my midday meal. Uncle Fred and Aunt Alice both smiled at this and my uncle said, "Well, my boy, I thought it seemed a pretty beakful, but it's the sort of error that's not difficult to forgive on a hot day like this. We don't drink at all with our meals, but then, as I've told you, what *we* do needn't concern you; we'll each please ourselves and then we'll slip into each other's ways like a bee into a blossom."

My cousin May, who came in just after six that evening, and whom I had not seen for nearly twelve years, proved to be one of those unfortunate girls who, with features apparently exactly like those of a good-looking father, are comparatively plain. Her expression was, however, very pleasant, and she had also inherited something of her father's fine physique, for while her height was only a few inches over five feet her figure was delightful, slim, lissom and slightly square-shouldered; she held herself well and there was an easy gracefulness about her carriage and all her movements which later on reminded me of the natural grace of the children dancing about a barrel-organ; her hair and eyes were brown and her complexion (due, as her father was often to tell me, to his herbal tonic) fresh and childlike; her voice was quiet and musical, with no trace of her mother's accent; altogether, then, by any standards, an attractive young woman—and yet while in a way I was both then and later conscious of an attraction towards her, there went with it as a sort of undercurrent a faint, indefinable feeling that was not strong enough to be called repulsion, but rather a faint, uneasy, physical antipathy. I find it extremely difficult to describe that feeling and, moreover, it was an intermittent sensation and at times vanished entirely, subdued, perhaps, by that very real charm which, I imagine, she must have had for most men. She was then twenty-six, four years older than myself, although to

me she seemed more. Later on she told me that I had struck her at that first meeting as a rather fat but very good-looking, overgrown schoolboy. Fat, indeed, I was then, my fifteen stone being, I should guess, quite three stone overweight for my six-feet-one-inch of height. And yet within two years I was below twelve stone and never again exceeded it. It was not my uncle's herbs that wrought the change.

I settled down quickly and easily into my new life; my work consisted mainly of weighing and packing herbs and preparing concoctions, infusions, and draughts, simple straightforward tasks that any intelligent child could have performed. During the afternoons I was free to do as I liked, but at least four of them, to my uncle's plain satisfaction, I devoted to the study of pharmacy, and on three evenings of the week I attended lectures at the London University. Since I had already passed the intermediate examination in science the course would be no more than two years, and a study of the syllabus left me with the assurance that I should find little difficulty in obtaining the necessary diploma by the end of that period.

On the domestic side my uncle was as good as his word, and both he and my aunt did everything possible to make me comfortable. I decided to have my meals with them, and this decision, I think, pleased them. My cousin May's attitude towards me was for a considerable time that of a tolerant, mildly affectionate and amused elder sister.

My uncle had certainly not exaggerated the prosperity of the business nor his reputation in the locality, and there was a constant stream, not only of purchasers for his herbal remedies, tonics, cosmetics, soaps and pick-me-ups, but of people (chiefly women bringing their children) desiring to consult him about their ailments or on matters of diet and personal hygiene. These customers he interviewed in a pleasant sitting-room behind the shop. It was, in fact, a consulting-room and he a medical adviser, although when one day after I had been there about three months I said as much

to him, he contradicted me with quite inexplicable vehemence and considerable heat, or so it seemed to me. "It's nothing of the kind, my boy, and I must ask you never to refer to it in that way; it is merely a sitting-room in which I receive visitors, where I am, so to speak, at home to callers, and if I give a little friendly advice to my visitors that is entirely my own affair. Please do bear this in mind." I thought he was making a lot of fuss about nothing, but assumed that it was a foible of his, like his niggardliness over furnishing, and as such was to be humoured. I was afterwards very careful not again to offend that odd susceptibility of his.

As time went on and I began to acquire some knowledge of herbs and their uses and could be of more use to him in the business, I grew to appreciate the fact not only that there was something in herbalism and that he was doing a valuable public service, but that it was necessary to tread very warily if one did not wish to find oneself upon the toes of the chemists and doctors of the neighbourhood. I soon became known to customers, and it was quickly apparent to me, to my amusement, that my uncle's mantle of wisdom was reckoned to cover me with its omniscient folds, endowing me with something of his knowledge and skill so that if at any time my uncle chanced to be engaged my opinion was sought and my diagnosis, when I was foolish enough to give one, accepted, and the remedy I prescribed purchased and faithfully swallowed. This occasioned no trouble, and, after all, I could not go very far wrong in the simple ailments which were the only ones I ever meddled with, since by that time I had learned, from hearing my uncle prescribing them so often, the herbs that were efficacious for those ailments. But one afternoon, as I was returning from a walk, a woman in one of the tenements threw up a window and hailed me. I stopped and she came to the door and said that her Alfie was queer and would I have a look at him. I went inside without any hesitation, looked at the youngster, told her it was nettlerash, and said if she sent someone along to the shop I'd give her a lotion

and a bottle of medicine. I mentioned this casually to my uncle at supper time. He put down his knife and fork and regarded me with such sincere consternation that I asked him what was wrong. "Wrong, my boy," he said, with an expletive that gained much force from its rarity on his lips, "you couldn't have made a worse mistake. If you were seen or it gets about we're in a pretty hole. It's against the law; neither chemists nor herbalists may visit professionally. Don't tell me you took any money from her?"

"I didn't," I replied, repressing a smile at his concerned, almost scared expression, "but I'm afraid it was only because she didn't offer it."

"That's something, anyhow. Well, it's done now and can't be undone, but for the love of God, my dear boy, don't do it again; you don't know what a mess you might land me in." It seemed to me that, legal or illegal, he was making a mountain out of a molehill and that the most that could have been done to him was to fine him, and that would have been a negligible punishment. It did not occur to me then that there might be something else he was nervous about; it did not occur to me until I had been there a year that there was anything at all in my uncle's business that was not entirely above board and open to the light of day; and yet, looking back upon that year now, I find it difficult to understand how I could have been blind to so many obvious clues; but then, of course, as I say, I suspected nothing, and I imagine normal folk are blind to the most obvious clues until suspicion begins to invade their minds.

The people of the neighbourhood and of more distant localities had the most complete faith in my uncle's skill, and I certainly had frequent ocular proof of the benefits experienced by the people who followed his advice and took the herbal medicines he prescribed; and these benefits certainly seemed large enough to merit being called cures; moreover, the drawers of his writing-desk bulged with letters from grateful patients who had, they alleged, been cured of the

most distressing and dangerous maladies and had not, after many years, had any return of a single disquieting symptom. But better than all these was the plain daily evidence before my eyes of my uncle, aunt and cousin; they were three hearty, healthy people, and they ascribed their rare condition simply and solely to the herbal concoctions they swallowed. While these were never pressed upon me, nor, indeed, offered me, my uncle was fond of riding his hobby and talking about herbs and the wonders they performed. (Flowers were not his hobby; they were his life.) I was fond of food and drink, a rather heavy smoker and as reckless and careless of my health as most young men, and it might be assumed that I should find my uncle's eulogies of herbs at least boring, if not actually irritating; but as a fact, when nothing else particularly attractive offered itself, I was more than ready to listen to him, for he was an interesting and at times an amusing talker. But for all the implied recommendations (for that, I assume, was what they were) of his long disquisitions and the practical proofs in the persons of himself, Aunt Alice, May and his patients, I was never persuaded to do more than sample any of his draughts, not even his famous morning tonic, for which he claimed that a wineglassful drunk regularly throughout life each morning on rising would render one completely immune from the multitudinous ills of the flesh; what was implicit in this claim never seemed to strike him or his clients as comic in relation to the other remedies he sold to the self-same people who bought this wonderful elixir. Possibly he would have justified himself by saying that it was necessary first to get rid of old maladies before the tonic could prove its worth, and that in any case he himself never took anything else. I must have made hundreds of gallons of that tonic, but I do not think I so much as tasted it. It was an infusion of senna, horehound, camomile, brooklime and burdock and, for children, was sweetened with honey.

As an odd little side-issue of my work for my uncle I began to find the mere names of the herbs and roots and barks I

handled, exercising a quaint fascination on my mind and something of that rather childish feeling remains with me even now, so that for the sheer love of writing down those almost forgotten names I am moved to mention some of the half-dozen or so of my uncle's "specifics" and the ingredients they contained. He had, by the way, quite a flair for choosing attractive names for his remedies, names, indeed, so alluring and health promising that I am inclined to ascribe something of their success to that factor alone; and the label on the bottle was equally attractive and hope-inspiring; a very sound psychological basis for any medicine, I should imagine; his famous Morning Tonic was, for example, called *Morning Glory*, and the label showed a beautiful naked child, obviously bubbling over with health, dancing over the grass with arms lifted towards the newly-risen sun. Other of his preparations were *Vitalix*, a very popular and apparently very successful cure for stomach troubles; it contained rosemary, centaury, barberry bark, sanicle and golden rod; *Winjoy* was for sluggish livers and was made from lovage root, cherry bark, bugle, fluellin and dandelion; *Novafor* was a pick-me-up of far more than local fame, and we had quite a large number of customers for this from all over the country; it was one of the few of his remedies I ever sampled, and it certainly (to quote a phrase I first heard Alister use when he was seventeen) had "a kick in it." It was a concoction of peruvian bark, arrach, damiana and gentian root. The Rayner Skin Lotion called *Velva* was also, in my uncle's phrase, a first-class line, and, indeed, the complexions of Maryfields stood sadly in need of its assistance; it consisted of raspberry, willow bark, lily root, loosestrife and clary. And there was his hair-wash, *Salvel*, containing orris root, camomile, rosemary, myrrh and celandine. How the names slip off my pen! And did all these gaily-labelled bottles of attractive-looking liquids perform the wonders they promised? Well, with the addition of faith and some sound advice from my uncle on diet and personal habits, I am inclined to think they were often very effective; certainly they

did no harm; it would be well if as much could be said for more orthodox medicaments.

I had been just over a year at 16 Angel Lane when a rather startling and alarming occurrence let in a revealing light upon the dark place in my uncle's business; I call it a dark place not in any moral sense, but because it represented an activity that was carried on *sub rosa*, "in the dark."

It was a hot morning in late July and I was busy pulverising roots in a mortar when there was a scream from my uncle's consulting room as, despite his interdiction, I always, at least mentally, designated it. I dropped my pestle and stood listening. For a minute there was no further sound and then again there was a scream, piercing, beastlike, horrifying. Without pausing to consider the wisdom of my action, I hurried from the shop and was about to knock on the door of the consulting-room when it opened violently and my uncle hurried out. His face was ashen; he pushed me backwards. "Don't come here," he said; "go back to the shop; it's nothing," and as I hesitated he snapped roughly, "go back! go back! dammit, go back!" And then more quietly, "It's all right, my boy; I'll explain later."

I returned to the shop. There was no more screaming, and some ten seconds or so later, hearing footsteps in the passage, I glanced through the small window in the door leading out of the shop into the house and saw a woman looking flushed and, I thought, somewhat dishevelled, in conversation with my uncle, who was accompanying her to the side door.

That night, when I returned from my lecture, I found Uncle Fred sitting up, and guessed that he was about to give me the promised explanation. He was reading a seed catalogue and merely glanced up with a smile and a nod when I entered the room. My supper finished, I filled my pipe and emptying the last of the beer from the jug, took my glass and sat down in the arm-chair opposite him. Presently he looked up again and said, "Well, Richard, I expect you're curious

to know what the trouble was this morning, and it's only right and proper you should. I ought, in fact, to have told you long ago. Perhaps you've guessed by now?"

I nodded. "Something, anyhow," I replied, "but there's no occasion to tell me anything you'd rather not, you know, Uncle."

He still had the seed catalogue on his knees and he kept it there all the while he was speaking, occasionally dropping his glance to its pages; but whether from an odd embarrassment or to gain time to marshal his words, or for thought, I cannot say.

"I'll tell you what there *is* to tell, my boy. It was a mistake not to have told you before. I don't propose to go into details, but to put it baldly and briefly, I help women in trouble, and I have been doing so now for at least ten years without mishap; this morning's affair was not a mishap, but merely what the French, I believe, call a *contretemps*. There are, as I am sure you know now, a number of herbs, roots, seeds and flowers which are exceedingly active in rendering such assistance to women, and in the beginning I did no more than prescribe these. But, as you will also know, the most active and powerful medicines are not always sufficient; their use is delayed until it is too late, and in such cases I—er—well," his glance dropping to his book, "render further aid. That really is all there is to be said about it. You will be asking yourself why I take so great a risk, and I am very doubtful if I can give you any answer that will satisfy you. It is not money; in the first place, the financial side of my ordinary business is so good and so sound, as you know, that we can afford every comfort and luxury in reason; in the second place, more often than not my services in these matters are given free. It is, then, not money. What, then, is it? Perhaps I do not know myself; but I may be able to throw some light upon it, although I confess it is not much and, into the bargain, it may all sound to you priggish—no! priggish is not the word; presumptuous is perhaps better, but it's not

the word I want. But it doesn't matter; words, after all, are usually used to hide thoughts and feelings rather than display them. Women, then, my boy, in my opinion, don't get a square deal out of life, out of modern civilised life, that is, life as we know it and have to live it, and the poorer they are the worse deal they get; but more than that, men don't give them a square deal, either in their personal relations or in the wider sphere of the laws they make; in other words, life is unfair to women and the law is damnably cruel. I need not expand this text; I am sure you will follow me. What I do then, to the best of my powers, is to redress the unfairness of life and the cruelty of men; and the risks I run by so doing I consider a small price to pay for the good I undoubtedly do. Don't run away, my boy, with the notion that I am a sentimental fool or an amorist or one of those other ists that are now coming into fashion. I'm nothing of the sort; I'd do the same for men as for women, if men needed such help. On the other hand, I would not have you believe that women are nothing to me and that I act in this matter with the aloof indifference of some god. I don't. I'm fond of women, but I'm inclined to think it's much the sort of fondness that other men have for children or dogs and horses; a sort of protective affection rather than anything else. Flowers are my love and not women. I can admire a beautiful woman with the next man, but compared with a flower she is nothing. The great difference between a beautiful woman and a beautiful flower is that the more closely you look at the flower the more hidden beauties you will discover, while such scrutiny of the woman reveals only a score of tiny blemishes and, moreover—well—no doubt you know what the French writer de Maupassant said upon the subject of beautiful women?" He paused and looked over to me. I confess I had listened to him with a good deal of disgust; his disclosure came at a most unfortunate time; I had but recently made the acquaintance of Barbara Grey, and somehow, because of her, the whole matter seemed sordid and to cover with a degrading slime the whole moving adven-

ture of sexual love. The remark about de Maupassant was a particularly unfortunate one; but for it I should doubtless have received my uncle's explanations without comment; but I had read de Maupassant and knew, or thought I knew, to what my uncle referred; and so I allowed my feelings to boil over and replied savagely, "I know he died from the effects of syphilis; but I don't know that that makes him an authority on women."

My uncle flushed a little and, I believe, sighed. He regarded me for a long moment in silence. His glance was certainly kindly, but there was in it also distress and something else I could not fathom. "I dare say not, my dear boy; I dare say not," he said; "well, it doesn't matter very much, does it? Let's drop the subject, eh? I think bed's been waiting for me a long while. Good-night."

CHAPTER V

BARBARA GREY

THERE were in those days (and for all I know still are) various students' organisations and societies connected with the London University. One of the most energetic and vocal of these was the Arts and Dramatic Society, whose name one might have thought explained itself, but not apparently to the satisfaction of its many members, who spent a great deal of time at the few meetings I attended not only explaining the aims and objects of their society, but themselves to each other, and the rest of the world to anyone who would listen. But this rather noisy and opinionated sodality of young men and women was leavened by a less serious minority whose activities were chiefly concerned with the arranging of dances, and it was at one of these, towards the end of my first year at Angel Lane, that I first met Barbara Grey, who was a student at the Floyd School of Painting in Soho.

Like many big men, I was a fine dancer, and to that gift, which I rather despised as a piece of social frippery that ill became a man, I owed my acquaintance with her, an acquaintance which none of my more prized physical and mental attributes would have gained me, for Barbara was that not uncommon type of young woman who could ignore every physical drawback and often gross manners and behaviour in a man provided he were a good dancer, while she would have refused a single moment of her time to Apollo himself had he lacked that one social grace which, in the words of those unlucky ones, is so low in the scale of human accomplishments that monkeys, bears and March hares can give an infinitely superior performance. To Barbara the dance was everything

and all else nothing. It was the rhythm, the motion and the music which entranced her, and I am sure the sexual side played no part at all. The reverse was true with me : unless a girl attracted me I did not enjoy dancing with her, and the stronger the attraction of my partner the more I enjoyed the dance. And so, with Barbara in my arms, dancing became the supremest sensual intoxication I had then experienced. I have never danced since those days; one does not willingly drink water after wine.

I want to tell this story of Barbara and myself as calmly and simply as possible, to tone down the colours, shade the lights, if only for my own sake; but I know too well how difficult I shall find it; how florid and sentimental it is all likely to sound; it is a hard task for a man to write coolly and reasonably of the one great love of his life. Perhaps, after all, it will be best if I do not attempt the impossible, but get it all down as quickly as I can, letting the words take care of themselves. If I did not love her at first sight (but I insist that I did) then undeniably within a week of our first meeting I was madly, passionately, unbearably in love with her. It is strange that I cannot describe her adequately, for even now, nearly forty years afterwards, I have only to close my eyes to see her as clearly and vividly as I ever did in my life. She was small and slim and upright; the perfection of her body made me tremble, thrust me into aching miseries of longing. Her hair was intensely black, thick and sleek, cut after the way of a Florentine boy's; it was not the bob which was to be so fashionable during and after the War, but something far more beautiful and distinctive; under artificial light and at a short distance it looked as if carved from ebony. Her skin was olive, her hazel eyes large and lambent, her nose small and slightly aquiline, her mouth lovely beyond comparison; I have never seen anything so entrancing as the shy sweetness of the smile which used to come to her lips when she greeted me, or when, later on, she held up her mouth for my kisses. I like to think even now

that that smile, just that supreme achievement of loveliness, was there for no one else, that it came to birth because of me, was for me and me alone, and that it died when I was no longer there to receive it. If only I could believe it!

But it was a long while before I passed from the status of a dancing partner, welcome solely because of that accomplishment, to that of an accepted lover; a long while indeed; many months; for we first met in April, and it was not until the following January that we had agreed that one day we would get married. There was no question, in Barbara's mind at least, of marrying soon; she had set her heart upon winning one of the Floyd scholarships to Rome, and if she succeeded would spend two years painting in Italy, and probably another in Germany. As for me, what I desired did not enter into the affair as a salient factor; I had to win a position of my own before marriage was a possibility and that, while not a particularly difficult task, was not likely to prove a short one; five years, in fact, was the period which Barbara accepted so lightly (or so it seemed to me), and I with such despondency, as the probable duration of our engagement. I do not think it ever occurred to me as other than a wild hope of impossible bliss that we should become lovers in more than name while we were waiting till the time came when we could get married; certainly it never entered my head to breathe the faintest suspicion of that wild hope to Barbara; I had no conception at all, strange as this may sound, how she would have received such a proposal. How little I must have known her? Perhaps. But how much does any man, any young man, know of the young woman he loves? It may be she would have agreed (how that thought tortures me now); it may be she would have refused in shocked, horrified dismay—that is how much I knew her, shall know of her. But it was not a commonplace in those days, especially for two such youngsters as we were—Barbara was only twenty. If it *were* frequently done, then I certainly never heard of it, and among all the young people with whom I mixed I never knew any

who were living together. I admit it was not the thing one shouted from the housetops, but I imagine we should have known, the secret would have got round sooner or later. Doesn't it to-day? But then no one bothers to-day; so we say; we old ones. But I doubt if it's true; aren't we pushing our own moral laxities on to youth?

But all that doesn't matter. Let me get back to the one sure piece of ground I am on with Barbara: I loved her for a year; I love her now; not one moment of all that time have I not loved her, has she not been there at the back of my consciousness rending my heart with intolerable longing and the black misery of my loss; I shall love her when I die, and if there were eternity I should love her through its infinity. And I do not know whether she ever loved me; I think she did; I believe she did; but I do not know; how can I know? even if she came to me on my deathbed and said to me, "Richard, I loved you once"—just that, only that; I'm not asking for more; not that she should say, "Richard, I love you; I have always loved you"—I don't ask for that; nor but just that she should say that once she loved me, once long ago, for a space, a little while, a few months or weeks or days. But if she came and said just that I should not know, not *know*; all my loving could not discover that for me. And I have never loved anyone else; only Barbara; Barbara Grey, my dear love.

And while, during that first year at Angel Lane, before I knew Barbara, I was working in the shop comfortable and happy enough in a tepid way, a little bored with the work and my studies, and, indeed, with my uncle and aunt, I was daily becoming the central interest in the life of my cousin May, and by the time I met Barbara she was in love with me. So much in love, indeed, and upon a plane beyond my reach, that she was presently to hear patiently and sympathetically my outpourings about Barbara, to suffer without complaint the poignant stabs I inflicted upon her; inflicted upon her brutally, and if not deliberately, yet with a carelessness of her

feelings that amounts to the same thing; for I was well aware of her love for me, and in comparison with my burning passion for Barbara it was of no more moment in my life than my morning shave—less, indeed, for that operation was occasionally hurtful. A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind! What a lie that is! Or it is for me. Far from my love for Barbara making me sorry for May, I was merely annoyed. Annoyed! at times I was furious and (abyss of priggishness!) considered it presumption on May's part, a presumption that somehow seemed to be slighting Barbara.

And yet I was glad to talk to May about Barbara. And I had, indeed, plenty to talk about, for I was by no means the only man in the field and, indeed, until I had Barbara's definite promise to marry me, I had plenty of cause for unhappiness and jealousy. And May listened to my miseries and my outbursts of temper, and comforted me and told me not to be a fool, and above all not to let Barbara see and to keep smiling and carry things with a high hand; and all the while she was sick for love of me, sick with love and utter hopelessness, knowing she meant less to me than my pipe and tobacco, great comforts these while she was but a minor one. And so she sat still and listened patiently and smiled and proffered good advice while I lashed out at life and love and moaned and wailed and cursed, and every now and then carelessly giving the knife a twist in her heart. The knife that presently was to enter my own heart and remain there always. Barbara, my love, my love.

I was, as I have said, by no means the only man in the field. I knew certainly of three; there might well have been three hundred; could any live man with blood in him see Barbara Grey and not hunger and thirst after her day long and night long and know no rest? I have heard it said that there is a limit to the physical pain which the body can bear and beyond that oblivion shuts down and brings peace; but there are no limits to the torment of the mind, no merciful blotting out of the agony; the knife twists, the hunger gnaws, the bleak anguish

flays, upon a rising scale of exquisite torture whose summit is death; that surely is the boon of death; I sometimes dream that there is eternity; that death cheats us as life has cheated us; that the last boon of annihilation is but the prelude to new birth; and the horror of that intolerable nightmare of eternal pain brings me so near to screaming hysteria, to madness, that only by blotting out the thought with drink can I keep my balance. For that nightmare destroys everything, destroys even the last hope of the wretched, and to that last hope I have clung many times in my life. I trust few men have clung to it so young as I was the first time. And all for love. "Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love." A lie. Unless they feared to die because of that unbearable dream.

But those others in the field. My rivals. It was odd I never really looked upon them as rivals; except perhaps Jack, possibly it was conceit; I was jealous enough, and blustered and swore and raged; not to Barbara, but to May; yet in my heart I am sure I thought them negligible and with little chance. There was Brian Ashley, a fellow-student at Floyd's, a short, stocky, dark boy of twenty, who, he said, worshipped her beauty and wished to marry her so that she could double the rôles of inspiration and model; Ashley had something of the rare genius of Gaudier-Brzeska and could model, carve, sculpture and paint with equal facility; he carved dozens of statuettes of Barbara, most of them representing her as some goddess of one of the ancient creeds or of some quaint cult invented by himself. I liked Ashley and admired his work, and I do not think Barbara's feelings towards him went much further.

There was James Mackenzie, who was studying medicine, and whom everyone called Jamie. He was fat, round, sandy and freckled—scarcely a romantic figure. But he had a good deal which might, I fancied, appeal to a girl; he was well off, generous, easy-going and almost grotesquely good-natured; a girl would have found in him most of the solid virtues likely

to wear well throughout life, and realising all this I regarded Jamie as a possibly dangerous competitor.

There was Jack Stanners, who had known Barbara for over two years and with whom she frequently went to dances, to the theatre or out to dine. For a long while I knew him only as Jack and only twice did I see him; it was not until I had known Barbara over six months that I learned his surname. Of the twice I saw him once was at a dance to which he'd brought Barbara, and the second time was only a glimpse of him passing in his car when I was walking down Oxford Street with Barbara. He was a stockbroker, middle-aged, as I thought him (he was thirty-five) and very comfortably off; a car in those days was in itself usually a sign of means, and his was a big Daimler for which he'd given the, to me, incredible sum of fifteen hundred pounds. Barbara talked a lot to me about him; he was good company, dressed well, danced well, and knew his way about with all the aplomb, poise and savoir faire of the well-educated, well-to-do City man. And yet, with all his advantages over me (I was poor and at times, as I very well realised, gauche and maladroit through ignorance and inexperience), I never really believed he stood a chance as a lover of Barbara's. Young Ashley possibly; Jamie possibly; but Stanners, short, dapper, a little too plump, his soft brown hair already thinning at the crown and over the temples, I could not take seriously as a rival to be feared. And so, although I knew he and Barbara were often together, far more often than I was with her, and although she frequently spoke of him and his manifold virtues as a cavalier, I was never really jealous of him despite the fact that I often joined his name with others in the bemoanings and maledictions I poured into May's patient ears.

For nearly a year I pestered Barbara (for I suppose it amounted to that) with my love, without making much headway, and my sole consolation was the fact that at least I was not dismissed nor discouraged. Whatever effect love may have upon some natures in the way of spurring them on to

ambitious effort, it certainly did not work so with me; while I did not entirely neglect my studies or drop attending lectures, I found it very difficult to concentrate my attention upon the aridities of pharmacy and I would cut a lecture without a qualm if there were a bare possibility of meeting Barbara. By the end of my first year's work for the diploma I had got well ahead of the schedule I had drawn up myself, and was quite sure in another year I should simply romp through the examination; but during the next ten months my slackness and my preoccupation with Barbara not only stopped any further progress, but sent me drifting backwards in a fashion that brought me surprised rebukes from the lecturers and would have occasioned my uncle much pain and anxiety had he known. I imagine he must have guessed something, for it was plain enough from my work in the shop that things were not the same with me.

I was, too, finding my comfortable home life with my uncle and aunt becoming irritating and irksome. Much of that feeling was doubtless due to the emotional strain I was enduring, but when that is taken into full consideration there still remained a fair amount of friction with my surroundings. My uncle was beginning to bore me and, I am sure, although I did not realise it at the time, that his disclosures to me about his altruistic side-line had antagonised me to such an extent that it was responsible for the opinion of him I was beginning to hold with increasing firmness: that he was an old humbug, a shady old humbug and, more, rather a nasty old humbug. I am sure now that I wronged him. I am equally sure in the light of what happened later that he had more than an inkling of my growing contempt and dislike.

If my feelings towards Uncle Fred were somewhat shadowy and uncertain (for I never really faced the matter to myself and confessed that I was contemning and disliking him), I was in no doubt at all how I felt towards my aunt with all her domestic virtues, her jolly good-nature and her untiring regard for my comfort; she not only bored me, but she fretted and

irritated me abominably, and her vulgar accent grew upon me to such an extent that it was at times only with difficulty that I could refrain from an outburst. But it needed a suggestion of May's to make me realise that the root of my plain antipathy towards my aunt was that I was ashamed of her, all her fine qualities weighed nothing with me against the ugly excrescence of her speech and accent. It was May's suggestion that I should ask Barbara home to tea that shed so revealing a light upon my feelings; there was, after that, no hiding from myself the fact; I had, indeed, been so horrified at the idea that I was nearly startled into blurting out the newly-discovered truth. But I managed to stammer that it was a great suggestion and that I would certainly act upon it, although I very much doubted if Barbara would come, as she loathed (I invented then and there this alleged peculiar phobe of hers) meeting fresh people at meal-times. I congratulated myself upon my successful guile and the ease with which I had navigated an awkward channel, and years later, when May told me that my face, voice and manner disclosed my true reason as plain as black on white, I was as angry as if I had been unjustly accused of treachery.

It was become rather an uneasily associated community, that family circle at 16 Angel Lane. I had already gathered that my uncle's illegal side-line was an anxiety to my aunt, and further, it was one of the very few bones of contention in their happy married life, and at times it was impossible for me not to hear their voices raised angrily in argument, her anger the hotter, I imagine, because discretion necessitated the use of innuendo and periphrase, a shift difficult to my aunt's very limited vocabulary. My own circumstances, too, were uneasy and not very happy, with my preoccupation with Barbara and her apparent indifference to my love, and that very slackness and idleness which gave me the more time for brooding and self-commiseration. Finally, there was May nursing her hopeless love for me and patiently and good-heartedly listening to my jeremiads upon life in general with

my own peculiar woes to lend emphasis to my gloomy conclusions. That May had other troubles besides those connected with myself did not occur to me; I thought very little about her; she was a convenient receptacle for my outpourings, but otherwise of no importance; whether she found life at 16 Angel Lane a bed of roses or of needles I neither knew, cared nor bothered to surmise; her outburst, when finally it came, was therefore startling; but that its tenor might be significant in respect to my future happiness did not enter my mind.

And then matters which had been, in my own affairs, for so long drifting aimlessly, suddenly halted and took a definite direction with new hope and new energies to give them impetus. Barbara failed to obtain her scholarship to Rome, and in a mood of depression and self-pity, with its accompanying desire to find firm ground to stand upon and a shoulder to lean against, she agreed to marry me. I now ascribe her agreement to that mood and desire, but I may be wrong, and certainly at the time no such notions were in my thoughts; I believed that she had at last found out that she loved me and was as eager for marriage as I was. For there was now no longer any talk of waiting five years; we were to be married as soon as I had obtained my diploma. But there, unluckily, was the canker in my newly-gathered rose, for I failed to qualify at the preliminary examination, which meant that I had now to wait another year before I could sit for my diploma. How I cursed my slackness and to Barbara and May bemoaned my ill-luck. I was ripe for a row as a safety-valve to my feelings, and hoped my uncle would reproach me and give me the opportunity to belabour him with the stripes I should have kept for myself. But he was too old and wary and refrained from any comment, even when I tried to goad him into criticism by the grotesque statement that I'd too much to do in the shop. He received that ungenerous lie with a friendly smile and nod, adding that if I needed more time for my studies there would be no difficulty about *that*. And so, finding no butt for my temper and my

soreness, I came finally to lay the blame upon the person solely responsible, a result which, if it did nothing else, determined me to make no such mistake the following year; and with this determination very much in the front of my mind, and with Barbara as goal and prize, I settled down to work; and for five months, a period which carried me over Christmas up to the end of January, I worked harder than at any other time in my life, not only at my studies, but in the shop. I found it somehow extraordinarily soothing to my hurt vanity to redouble my efforts so far as my uncle's business was concerned, and his surprise and gratitude I considered well-won, but nevertheless well-merited; the extra pound a week he gave me that year as a sort of surprise Christmas present I felt was a generous gesture on his part, but no more than my due.

Certainly a good deal of credit *was* due to me during that autumn and winter for the assiduity with which I stuck to my work—for those months were just the ones when the social side of life with Barbara as my companion called most enticingly. Dances, parties, theatres; there was scarcely an evening which I could not have filled with one or other of these, and in Barbara's company, and yet I limited myself to one dance with her a week with the addition of a dinner followed by the theatre once fortnightly; and to this bargain with myself I stuck dourly, proof against desire at times so urgent that to find relief I turned angrily upon my uncle or aunt or May (especially upon May). Yes, I stuck it out, counting upon my sure reward.

Since I was seeing comparatively so little of Barbara now, we had arranged to write to each other twice a week, and these letters of hers, which always arrived by the first post on Wednesdays and Saturdays, were the greatest delight of those busy months. They came in pale blue envelopes, faintly scented and very plump and promising; an external promise which their contents fulfilled, for Barbara wrote well and gave good measure, and I reckoned it a short letter which consisted

of fewer than eight sheets. They were the first love-letters I had ever received, as they were also the last. I cannot hope to describe how sweet and beautiful and fragrant they were; I never opened the envelope until I was alone, and I read the letters over and over again, thrilled and moved by the commonplaces of the language of love with its old endearments that are yet so tender and strange and as fresh as dew. And in the letters I wrote to Barbara I took a shy delight in the use of those very words of love which but a year before I could not imagine any man using without his tongue in his cheek and his lips drawn down in a mocking grimace. I did, in fact, enjoy my letters to Barbara almost as much as I did hers to me, and I read them over and over many times before posting them; sometimes, indeed, slitting open the stamped envelope to read again some especially passionate phrase, to savour it, to whisper it and then to allow my thoughts to play about the warm, vivid, sensual images it conjured up. The joy of being in love! the sweetness of those letters! And how I loved Barbara, hungered for her, wanted her so unbearably that at times nothing brought me any relief but the most violent physical exertion, so that I took to ending my day with long fast walks which, as soon as I was in the open spaces, broke into a run which I kept up until my lungs seemed bursting and, despite the cold, I was running with sweat. I lost quite a stone that winter; I was to lose more before long. And I began to avoid drinking as scoldously as I avoided leisure, and for much the same reason; if I spent an hour before going to bed in a bar, even if I limited myself to two or three glasses of beer, I would find myself unable to sleep because of the overwhelming hunger for Barbara which tormented me; and so I cut out drink altogether. It was, indeed, an ascetic's life I lived during those months, a stoic's even. It was certainly beneficial physically, improving my wind, reducing my weight and hardening my rather flabby muscles; I cannot say that it improved my health, for that was, as far as I could judge, in no need of improvement; I had never been ill; the

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most I had ever had to complain of was a headache or a cold; to this day I have never been kept in bed by sickness, never needed the services of doctor or nurse other than Doctor Rum and Nurse Ale. And I shall not die in bed. When my time comes (and I shall know it as I have known other things in my life, in Alister's life) I shall go off by myself and find a hidden corner to die in like the beasts.

I came down to breakfast on the last Wednesday in that January and noticed in a quick glance as I sat down Barbara's usual letter beside my plate. I had not seen her since the previous Thursday, but I had had my Saturday letter. I picked the letter up and slipped it into my pocket to read with a pipe after breakfast before I began my morning's work in the shop. I had picked up my knife and fork before it occurred to me that the envelope had none of its customary plumpness. But perhaps I had been mistaken, and with a wary eye upon my aunt and uncle (May having already left for the City), to see if they were watching me, I slipped my hand into my pocket to reassure myself by feeling. To my dismay the envelope felt so thin that it seemed impossible it could contain any letter, and for a moment the foolish fancy came to me that Barbara had forgotten to put it in before sealing the envelope. That fancy occupied my mind the briefest of moments and was replaced by an uneasiness that destroyed my appetite like sudden nausea. I managed, however, to eat enough to pass muster, and draining my coffee-cup, mumbled something about some chemical equations I wanted to work out, and leaving the table hurried up to my room, first filling and lighting my pipe before facing what, it seems to me now, I already knew.

The letter was short. I remember it word for word, but I think I should have remembered it had it been a dozen times as long. My dear Richard (it ran), since there is nothing I can say which would be any excuse, I will keep to the bare facts, which are that Jack and I were married yesterday by special

licence and are crossing to France this afternoon for a long honeymoon. I am posting this at Folkstone. BARBARA.

I know of no words which can tell of the shattering effect of that letter upon me. It came with the smashing, bewildering suddenness of a bomb dropped from an aircraft. Consider for a moment; I was Barbara's accepted lover and we were engaged to be married, had already, indeed, discussed where we should live and other happy intimate little details; I had been out to dinner and to a theatre with her the previous Thursday, and two days later had had a long and loving letter from her. And then this.

I know it is said that the first agony of a terrible wound is mitigated by a merciful numbness of the senses which enables the stricken wretch to gather all his forces to fight. It may be true for most people; it was bitterly untrue for me. From the first moment of the blow body and spirit cried out in unbearable pain; whatever stoicism there was in me left me; all control vanished; I was like a beast mortally and appallingly wounded that screams and screams and run round in blind circles of torment. I felt physically sick, a cold nausea twisted my belly, clutched at my stomach, so that the food I had just eaten rose up chokingly in my throat. I got up from my chair and, walking over to the looking-glass, stared at the reflection of a face I hardly knew, drawn, ashen, beaded with sweat.

I turned away and went back to my chair and read through the letter again and sat still I don't know how long struggling against my pain, striving for control of my thoughts, of the threatening breakdown of all my forces into hysteria; and as clearly as if the actual words were being shouted in my ears I heard a voice crying, "Let go! let go!" And wondering whose voice it was and what it meant, I drew nearer and nearer to the blackness of utter mental overthrow. And suddenly my breath caught in my throat, a sob checked chokingly; I put out my hands as if I were groping, and jumping from my chair strode across the room and pushing aside the par-

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titioning curtain, flung myself on my bed and broke into violent weeping.

Oh, I know what can be said. I could once have said it all myself. A string of words meaning nothing at all. I wept, I say; wept and sobbed without restraint and again drew near to that blackness, drew near also to the verge of suicide and drew back and savoured my pain upon my tongue and ceased my weeping and lay still and watched myself upon the rack. It was my first agony, my first intolerable hurt, and I could not bear it.

I do not remember how I passed the rest of that day; even the days that followed and the weeks have a strange shadowiness about them, so that it may be, after all, that my senses were somewhat dulled. Or it may have been the drink I took during those weeks, for I fled to drink as the only anodyne I knew. I am sure now it must have been the drinking, for those weeks, those five weeks, wear in recollection that haziness, that uncertainty of outline, that shifting and changing mistiness that is associated with images received by a drunken brain. But I could not have been drunk all those long weeks; I must have gone about my work, eaten and talked and behaved as a reasonable being. I must have done these things to a certain extent, enough, no doubt, to save me from friendly interference if not from uneasy comment; but I don't remember; just that. I say I must, for example, have eaten; that is true enough, but it could have been but little, for there stirs in my consciousness a dull memory of continual nausea, a complete lack of any desire for food; and certainly, when I came out of that ordeal, my weight was down well below twelve stone and my clothes hung about me. I was a different man; something was gone out of me; something had been killed in me, killed by Barbara, as I said at the beginning of this story. How easy it is to laugh at that, isn't it? Sentimental clap-trap. Of course it is, but it is true to the facts for all that; a part of me was dead and has remained dead ever since; killed by the only

woman I have ever loved, whom I love still, as hungrily, as achingly as I ever did; whom I shall be loving when my time comes to die; loving as much, as hopelessly; the pain still there as it would be throughout eternity; that eternity whose possibility was a dreadful nightmare; but not now; no, not now; has it not become my only hope?

For five weeks I moved through that twilit existence of nightmare and emerged from it, as I say, a changed man; a man with something dead in him. But I emerged with one clear determination: I would clear out, go away somewhere, anywhere; escape; that was it. As if I could escape from myself! Only madness enables one to do that, and I was sane enough. Is that why madmen laugh so triumphantly? But I didn't know then there was no escape; I thought it just a physical thing; a mere moving of one's body away from all the old familiar things; what fools we are at twenty-four! And what would we not give at sixty to recapture something of that folly. And so I decided to go away, the farther the better; it seemed just a matter of distance; the farther away the more complete the escape, and so I would go to Australia. And at supper that very night I dropped my bombshell, my little petard, my cracker, my tiny squib. But it was not so little in effect. Quite the contrary; flattering even. Consternation is the aptest word to describe the expression upon my uncle's face; perhaps my aunt seemed merely puzzled; nothing deeper than that. And May? She just looked at me and then away again, and went on eating, a little more slowly, perhaps, as if the food had lost its savour. Of course it had. I knew that well enough. She loved me. It must have hurt. Hurt damnably. But she showed nothing beyond that quick glance and the sudden lack of interest in her food. She was more of a stoic than I. Women are, I suppose. But I was not thinking of her. "I'm going to Australia, Uncle Fred," I said, taking a long drink at my glass of beer and watching them all.

"Going *where*, my boy?" staring over to me, his knife and fork gripped almost convulsively at what bayonet instructors call "the ready."

"To Australia. At once. As soon as I've cleared up."

"Have you got a job out there, Richie?" my aunt asked, her eyes a little wide, one cheek rounded with an immense sweet-pickled onion.

"Not yet. I'll get there first and then take a look round. I don't fancy I shall have much difficulty in finding a job; I'm not particular."

"D'you think you're doing a wise thing, my boy?" my uncle asked.

"I'm sure of it," I rejoined boisterously; "dead certain."

"Well, if you're sure, of course," taking a huge bite at a crust of wholemeal bread and leaving his comment unfinished.

All this time May had said nothing. And suddenly I wanted her opinion, and felt aggrieved at her silence. She knew all about Barbara. Or as much as I could tell anyone. "What d'*you* think, May?" I asked, looking at her fixedly.

"I'm afraid I don't know enough about Australia, Richard, to say one way or the other," she replied quietly.

"You mean you don't think I'll get a job?"

"No; I don't mean that. I'm sure you will. Either in Australia or anywhere else."

"But you agree with Uncle, don't you?" I persisted.

"I don't, Richard," very quietly, her glance lifting and falling again quickly; "it's for you to say what you think is best for yourself."

"It's the sort of thing, my boy," put in my uncle, "which needs a lot of thought; I hope you've not decided it all on the spur of the moment; you're a bit that way, you know," with his familiar kindly nod and smile; "young men are."

"I'm twenty-four, and I look thirty, so they tell me."

"You're not looking too well lately, Richie," said my aunt, as if glad to change the subject to something easier of discussion.

"You're not, my boy, and that's flat," my uncle said loudly. "Look here; never mind this Australia business; leave it for a bit and take a holiday; go away to the sea-side—"

"What? in February! it's cold enough here. No, thank you."

"Then go abroad for a holiday; go to Spain or Italy; take a month or two months and go tramping. Italy's lovely in the spring, I'm told. The money needn't worry you. You've earned a holiday I'm sure *and* all expenses so—"

"I've plenty of money, Uncle," I lied, "but I don't want a holiday. I want a change."

"But it *would* be a change, Richie," my aunt broke in, her head on one side, her face screwed up in thought as if the problem were beyond her.

I began to grow irritated. What the devil did they want to cackle about holidays for? A holiday simply meant coming back. The very thing I'd no intention of doing. They were treating me like a boy who didn't know his own mind. Damn it all! wasn't I my own master. "Not the change I want, Aunt Alice," I said harshly; "it's a complete change I need; I want to get right away; to clear out." My irritation increased as I spoke and I went on angrily, my voice rising, "I'm fed up, sick to death of all this and I'm going; I'm *going*, I tell you!"

"All right, my boy; all right," my uncle said soothingly; "no cause to get annoyed. You're your own master. But I'm sorry to hear it; we're all sorry to hear it. We've begun to look upon you like—"

But I did not want the affair shifted to a sentimental plane of his own choosing and I pushed back my chair and getting up, said, "I'm going along to the Club; I expect I'll be late in. No need to talk any more about it. And no use. There's nothing more to talk about, in fact. I've not done anything in the matter yet. Except made up my mind. I shan't run away without kissing you all good-bye." And

with that I shot my chair back under the table and sauntered away whistling.

It was after midnight when I got back. I was drunk. Not incapably drunk or maudlin or anything of the sort; no one would have guessed it; even a police-surgeon would have given me the benefit of his rare doubt. No; I was just comfortably under the influence of the five or six pints of beer I had drunk at the Club and the double whisky I had rounded them off with; I was lit-up, exalted, good-humoured, happy; happy of course is a relative term; I was happy for me; I felt "good," at peace, ready to take a genial view of life. I was not feeling sleepy and decided if my fire were still in I'd stoke up and over a pipe or two spend a pleasant half-hour or so planning my new life. I had to pass through the large family parlour and pushing open the door unceremoniously, not expecting to find anyone up, I saw a cheerfully blazing fire and May sitting in a big arm-chair. I thought she was asleep, for the gas was out and there was no other light but that of the fire. But she stirred at my entry and looking up at me smiled.

I smiled at her. "Believe in making yourself comfortable," I said, looking down at her warm flushed face and thinking she looked remarkably pretty in the firelight.

"Don't you?"

"By George, I do! It's a foul night outside." I moved towards the fire, holding out my hands to the flames. "That's grand," I said, stirring a big log with my boot so that the flames leapt higher.

"Well, sit down and get warm. You might as well be comfortable."

"Not a bad idea. I'll bet my fire's out. You don't mind?"

"Don't be silly."

"Shall I light the gas?"

"Not unless you want to. I'd rather have just the firelight. Unless you want to read."

"Read? Good God, no! This'll do for me all right. Read!" I laughed. "I'm sick of reading. Damn all books, everything in them, the fools who write them and the bigger fools who read 'em. I'll sit and browse. Don't mind if I don't talk? I don't feel chatty."

"Of course I don't mind, you silly, you know how I hate being chatty; you needn't flatter yourself you're the only one with great thoughts to think. Your pipe's out. You're not going to stop smoking. I like the smell of your tobacco; what is it?"

"Navy cut, I'd no idea of not smoking so you needn't flatter *yourself*. And I thought you weren't going to chat. Be quiet. Why don't you do some sewing or something and let me think."

"You can't sew in this light, stupid. I could knit, but I'm too comfy to get up. But I won't say another word." And she turned sideways in her chair so that I could see nothing of her face but a half-shadowed, half-red-lit profile. I watched it for a moment and then my glance went to the smoke eddying slowly up from my pipe bowl and watching its slow drift I let my mind wander off upon my Australian adventure.

Presently my attention came back to May and there for a time I decided to let it remain. Somehow she seemed to make an extraordinarily attractive picture coiled up in the big chair; her figure was slim, alluring, almost beautiful; I had always been aware of that but never before had it seemed touched with that added grace it now wore; and her face too seemed beautiful; of course it was a touch of the firelight now flickering, dying down and leaping up again; and yet there was about her expression a soft sweetness that could not be due to the light. She looked, indeed, as she lay coiled there, lovely and desirable, and suddenly as I watched her, taking in the line of her breast and the seductive curve that ran from waist to ankle I felt my heart quicken its beat and I began to play with the notion, half-mockingly, half-bitterly

at first, of going over to her and making love to her, just a matter of a kiss or two and a caress. I wanted someone to kiss; I wanted a woman's fingers through my hair, stroking my cheek; I wanted a woman's kisses on my mouth. They wouldn't be Barbara's caresses; not Barbara's kisses; but I was hungry; how hungry I was at that moment for a woman's kisses and caresses! And they were mine to take; I knew that well. If only it had been Barbara. I pushed the aching thought savagely away from me and getting out of my chair went over to May's and kneeling down upon the rug took her hand and kissed it and then rested my head upon her so that my cheek lay on hers. She said in a quiet voice, without moving, "Why do you do that, Richard?"

I did not answer. I found myself trembling and overwhelmed with desire to take her in my arms and kiss her. I got up slowly and then, stooping, picked her out of the chair and carried her over to the big wide sofa where I sat down holding her closely in my arms. She turned her body so that she faced me and I saw how suddenly white she had become. I could not endure the frank questioning of her eyes and straining her to me I began to kiss her, softly, slowly, almost mechanically at first, her cheeks, her hair, her eyes. She tried a little to withdraw herself and then, as my lips moved to her own, she sighed, put her arms about my neck and held her mouth against mine in a long passionate kiss. But presently she drew back her head and said again, her voice shaking, "Why are you doing this, Richard?"

Why was I? Could I tell her? Didn't she know? Could I say "Just for comfort, May, and just because I want to have a woman in my arms and a woman's kisses?" How could I say that? I was not even sure myself. I didn't know what to say and then I said what suddenly seemed the only possible thing to say, "Because I love you, May."

But she shook her head and drew herself farther away from my embrace, her face flushed, her eyes bright. How pretty and desirable she looked. I felt the softness and

warmth of her body against me and my pulses raced; and as she began, "You don't, Richard," I cried out, "I do, May; by God! I do," and began again my passionate, hungry kissing. And as before, as if unable to struggle against me, she returned my kisses, now crying, but so noiselessly that I did not know until I felt the tears salt on my lips. At this I began to whisper endearments, soothing her, telling her over and over again I loved her and at last pleaded with her to say something (for all this while she was silent and very still in my arms) to say she loved me, that she would marry me.

At last she said, "You know I love you, Richard."

"And you'll marry me?"

"No, Richard. You don't love me. You know you don't. I'm not blaming you; don't think that. I understand, Richard. Something, anyhow. I'm terribly sorry," her voice breaking; "I'd do anything I could to help you."

"Then marry me, May, marry me; I love you; I swear it. I want you; I want you more than anything else in the world."

"Yes," she said very softly, "I know. You want me." And she began stroking my cheek gently, and then, hiding her face from me, and putting her mouth to my ear she whispered, "Would that help you, Richard? Would that comfort you? Oh, you poor boy." And then, while for a moment I did not understand, did not grasp her meaning, she went on slowly, wistfully, still keeping her face hidden, still whispering softly, "Did you think I wouldn't do that for you, Richard? without—without your pretending, you poor boy—" And suddenly I understood and was overwhelmed and in that rush of emotion I believed I loved her and took her again into my arms and made her look at me and swore I told her nothing but the truth and kissed her mouth again. But as if it were all nothing she released herself and lay down upon the sofa and took my hand and drew me down beside her; and presently I took that love

and comfort she offered me with all her soul, with all her body.

It was my first embrace of love and it left me shaken and completely overthrown; my whole being submerged, all my emotions, as it seemed, gathered up and concentrated in a warm drowsiness. For a long time I lay still in her arms and in a while I slept. I opened my eyes later to darkness; the room chilly; the fire ashes. May still lay beside me, but I knew she was awake. I drew myself out of her arms and slipping softly from the sofa lit the gas and sat down in one of the arm-chairs. She sat up, blinking a little, and smiled over at me with an expression of indescribable tenderness. "May," I said, "when will you marry me?"

"I won't marry you."

I wanted to laugh, to shout, to act like a boisterous schoolboy. "You will, May," I said loudly, "you will; d'you hear? You *must*. If you say no again I swear I'll go up and tell your mother and father—"

"Richard, please! You don't *want* to marry me; you know—"

"I know I do. And I'm going to. So the sooner—"

"But Australia?"

"Damn Australia! Unless you'd like to go there."

She shook her head.

I went over to her and again sat beside her. "You will then, May?"

"If you're sure, Richard. Oh, if only—"

But I stopped her with my hand on her mouth and smiled into her eyes and said, "Be quiet; that's enough. Now when? the sooner the better, isn't it?"

"Isn't it, what?" she said, and then, before I could answer, she went on with a shy smile, "I meant isn't it, darling; you've not called me—"

"Pooh!" I laughed; "d'you think that means anything. You *are* a darling, and that's enough. Now when are we going to get married?"

"When you like."

"Is that true?"

She nodded, her eyes dancing, her lips smiling, her whole manner for the first time gay and happy, "As soon as ever you like, Richard, darling." And she tugged gently at my hair and drew my head down and kissed my mouth. "And now," she said, with a little laugh, "we'll talk business. Light your pipe."

"I thought we'd settled the business," I replied. "Look at the time."

"Never mind the time. It's only two or just after."

"Might as well make a night of it," I laughed; "is that it? Pity the fire's out."

"There's paper and kindling and more dry logs in the kitchen," she said; "make it up and then we'll talk about what we're going to do, for if we're going to get married soon—"

"At once!" I interrupted.

"At once, then; you can't go on with your stud—"

"I've not the slightest intention," I laughed. "All right, I'll make up the fire and then we'll talk it over."

I did not light the gas in the kitchen, and as I groped about for the wood in the chilly little room I felt as if my emotional fires, too, were out; a grey depression began to invade my mind, and suddenly I realised the utter folly I had committed and knew the wrong I was doing May. I had a moment, as I gathered up the logs into my arms, when I was on the point of rushing back into the room to tell her I had lied and to beg her forgiveness; but the moment passed; I knew I couldn't do it, and presently I returned with my burden (my double burden and May's greater than mine), whistling softly and cheerfully; and, nodding to her gaily, I knelt down to relight the fire.

"And now," May said, when the wood was well alight, "you sit there and I'll sit here; I'm pretty sure we can't talk business in one chair." And presently, having settled our-

selves, she went on, "You're not going on with your study, Richard? That's right, isn't it?"

"I'm not; not at any price."

"Right; that's out of the way, then, and I'm glad to hear it."

"Glad?"

"Yes; as glad as I can be." Her vehement tone surprised me, and noting this, she went on, "I'm glad you're not going to get your diploma and come into the business here with all its—its—beastliness."

"Beastliness? Good——"

"Oh, you know what I mean," passionately. "It *is* beastly and wretched and sordid. It's—it's filthy, filthy and degrading; I loathe it."

"I think that's the wrong way to look at it, May," I replied, amazed at what seemed to me a sort of sexual bigotry and forgetful of my own outburst of over a year ago; but then in my case it was rather de Maupassant's gross cynicism I was reviling than my uncle's actions or views, or so it seems to me now. "It's certainly a risky business, but beastly and filthy are a bit strong, aren't they? After all, it's the way of life——"

"That isn't the point at all, you silly!" she interrupted with, I thought, a touch of weariness and of asperity in her tone, despite her smiles, "but it doesn't matter; the point for us is that we're leaving it all behind and starting afresh. And, therefore, we've only to consider where we're going to start and at what? We'll want capital, whatever we're going to do. I don't suppose you've more than tuppence."

I made a grimace. I'd forgotten this side of the affair. "Not much more, May, I'm afraid; just about fifty pounds, to be exact."

"Well," smiling, "that's fifty more than I expected. I've over three hundred. I'd two hundred left by grandfather, when I was twenty-one, and the rest I've saved since. I ought to have saved a lot more, as I'm getting a hundred and fifty

a year and pay nothing here. But I'm extravagant; I like pretty things, especially clothes; and I love silk next my skin."

"That's not extravagance. I'd hate you to wear calico or whatever the damn' stuff is; I don't believe in beauty unadorned. I think a leg in a silk stocking far lovelier than a naked leg."

"Of course. Now three-fifty pounds; what can be done with that?"

"We could have a royal honeymoon on the Continent, blew it all and trust to Providence to look after us," I suggested frivolously, but not without a touch of serious intent.

May nodded. "Love to. But I never can *do* these daft things. Must be the Scots streak in me; Mother's father was Scots. So we'll keep to sensible things. What d'you suggest?"

"Mind's a blank at the moment; what d'you?"

"Well, it seems to me we've got to make use of what assets we have at hand. I mean we ought to try to get something we've experience of, don't you think?"

"Sounds all right. 'Fraid I don't show up any too well. A year or so messing about in a publishers, ditto in Fleet Street on the advertising side; then two years at Telfer's Academy of—"

"Well, isn't that all right?"

"What?"

"Why, a small school? And at some rather nice little seaside resort. I'm sure we could do that. I've been with the A.S.T. for eight years and I know quite a lot about education in general, while your two years at Telfer's supplies the inside information, the details."

"God forbid, May!" I exclaimed so fervently that she laughed, despite her obvious chagrin.

"You don't like the idea?"

"I don't. Loathe it. My two years at Telfer's were two years in hell; not a hell of torment; nothing so definite as that; a cold-porridge-wet-feet-and-cold-in-the-head sort of hell, if you see what I mean; just a string of small miseries

and discomforts with nothing to break the monotony. No, May, rule that right out. No more schools of any sort for me. Besides, I hate kids; that's something else I got from Telfer's."

"All right, darling; we'll cross schools off then. Now it's your turn."

I yawned. "Not an idea in my nut. Look here; let's sleep on it and then talk it over to-morrow."

"D'you mean with mother and father as well?" a trace of diffidence in her tone.

"I don't see why not. Sort of family council. Grand idea. Now pop off to bed. You go first and I'll put out the gas and see the fire's left all right." She turned to me with a smile and put her arms round my neck and set her lips very gently and tenderly against mine. I held her closely for a moment, kissing her with feigned passion, with no response in my body to her caress; unless, indeed, it were a faint quiver of aversion.

I had a strangely vivid and disturbing dream that night, so vivid as to remain in my waking memory, which my dreams rarely do; so disquieting that I have never forgotten it. And I dreamt it at least twice, once soon after I fell asleep, for when I looked at my watch it was barely half-past three; and the second time just before I got up at eight o'clock. In my dream I experienced again my love-embrace with May but through the long-drawn-out ardours of the dream it was at first May who lay in my arms and then Barbara and then May again; and at the supreme moment it was Barbara's mouth I sought and found so hungrily.

The effect of the dream was still strongly upon me as I was dressing and I had a sudden queer feeling that I was visited by a revelation, was fey, clairvoyant, endowed with that second-sight in which Aunt Alice so firmly believed and about which I had so often chaffed her. I was suddenly quite certain that May had conceived and that the babe would be

a boy; but allied to this certainty was the strange wild fancy that it had been really Barbara who at that last moment lay in my arms and the boy, born of May's body, would be Barbara's.

That sort of fantastic day-dreaming (for that is all my "revelation" my "second-sight" and the rest of it amounted to) was an entirely new occupation for me; perhaps I should say new experience. I had hitherto been derisive about such things, ascribing them to a sick body or a sick mind, and while I saw no reason to alter my opinion I was compelled to widen the connotation of sick to include all conditions not normal, which permitted me to explain everything without difficulty and without denying cherished convictions. For if one thing was certain it was that my love initiation had left me for the time being normal neither in body nor mind.

CHAPTER VI

STORHAVEN

It was a surprised uncle and aunt who regarded me across the breakfast-table next morning. May had already left for the City and it was an understood thing that all discussion of the matter should be left till she returned in the evening. But neither my uncle nor my aunt honoured that undertaking to the letter and while his breach (with the exception of one remark about not caring much about first-cousin matches) limited itself to jocose innuendo my aunt was by no means so discreet and displayed a surprisingly tart disapproval not, to my amazement, of myself as a husband but of May as a wife, the core of her disapprobation being the fact that while May was twenty-eight I was four years younger. "Not trying to interfere, Richie," she said shaking her head, "and too late now I s'pose if I *did*, but it's not right, y'know, not right at all. Man ought t' be ten years older'n girl he weds; ten years at least. Other way round never did answer and never will. And for why? Because women are ten years older 'n men to start with and they grow older quicker. Time you're thirty-six May 'll be forty, which means you'll be a young man and she'll be an old woman. And then what happens? Ask y'self. Well 's too late now I s'pose and we'll have t' hope for the best."

She seemed disappointed that I made no comment beyond a smile, and refused to be drawn into any argument, and as she appeared inclined to pursue the matter even without any such encouragement I hurried over my breakfast and went straight into the shop. I imagine my uncle reproved her, for no further reference was made to the marriage at dinner-time;

and at the family council which began at half-past seven that evening she refrained from voicing her objection and my uncle in turn said nothing about first cousins. Apparently they had both agreed that since we seemed to have made up our minds there was nothing left for them to do but give any advice upon ways and means which might be asked for. I imagine also that both had in the past found May too redoubtable an opponent to tackle in the open. And Uncle Fred's first remark when we were seated round the fire rather bore out my assumption. "Well," he said, with his genial nod and smile, "I suppose like all modern young people you've got everything cut and dried and asking father's and mother's advice (we won't mention permission, eh?) is just a formality."

"It isn't at all, Father!" May laughed; "we hope you'll both be able to help us a lot."

"I see, my dear. Well, let's know just where we stand. You *have* made up your minds about getting married?" looking from one to the other of us. May smiled over to me and nodded to her father and I said, "Absolutely!" on a light-hearted note which was I felt a poor counterfeit. And so I added boisterously, "And as soon as possible."

"Right. And you've decided," looking at me fixedly, "to give up any idea of getting your dip——"

"Decided, Uncle," I broke in, "to cut all that out entirely; we're going into something new and fresh." And I glanced over to May, who smiled and added, "fresh woods and pastures new as well, Father."

"Ah, well," put in Aunt Alice, "you're not children and if you don't know your own minds now you never will. What are you thinking of doing?"

Again May looked at me and her expression so plainly asked for a lead that I began rather lamely, "I rather think we could do well in some small business;" and then, with an eye on May to note how she took the announcement, I

continued, "something for example like a newsagent and tobacconist."

"And book-shop with library," May broke in so hastily that it occurred to me she'd already decided things to her own satisfaction. "That's right," I said, "something of that sort; quite a good-class business; something out of the ordinary."

"And," went on May, "at a seaside resort, a growing place for preference." And with that she produced from under the sofa cushion a copy of *Dalton's Weekly Advertiser* which she had brought home with her from the City. "I looked through the businesses for sale while I was having lunch," she continued, "and I've marked one which seems made for us. Here it is; read it out, Richard; it's the one with a red cross against it. And I looked up Storhaven on the map and in the gazetteer. It's a select little town at the mouth of the Stor in Suffolk. Population at last census was two thousand four hundred and at the census before one thousand nine hundred; so it's a growing place. It's a hundred and six miles from London and there's a good train leaves Liverpool Street at ten every morning reaching Storhaven at five minutes to two." She paused a trifle breathlessly and looking up from the paper I remarked with a smile, which I hoped appeared genuine, "you've certainly been busy, May."

"We've got to be!" she laughed. "Read it out."

I had considerable difficulty in understanding the abbreviations in the advertisement and the final one s.a.v. completely defeated me as it had done May. It was not until we interviewed the owner that we learned its meaning. Had we known all those three innocent-looking letters connoted in the way of argument and haggling and £. s. d. we might have decided to avoid closer acquaintance with them. The advertisement ran: TOBACCO STATIONERY NEWS-AGENT Gd psnt rsg seasde rsrt. Gd lvg accm 3 bdrms

ktchn prlr. Grwg bsnss £14 wk scope fr dble. Acctp £200 s.a.v. Apply Baxter, Market Place, Storhaven, Suffolk.

"It says nothing about books or a library," I said when I had read it out.

"Stationery includes books," rejoined May; "and there's mostly a lending library; people expect it."

"Fourteen pounds a week means gross receipts, I take it," said Uncle Fred; "that's not what you might call a gold mine. I don't know how profits run in such lines but if it's three pounds clear you'd be lucky."

"Scope for double, Father," May smiled.

"Oh, yes, *scope!* Good old word!" he laughed; "sort of short way of spelling optimism."

"Any idea what s.a.v. means, Uncle?" I asked.

"Not a notion. I suppose you think I ought to know. Well," with his genial smile, "I don't. There's a lot I don't know about business on the jargon side but, my boy, if I don't know anything s.a.v. I know a bit about £s.d."

"Perhaps it's something to do with replying to the advertisement," suggested Aunt Alice.

May laughed. "You're thinking of R.S.V.P., aren't you, you old silly? But I wish we knew. It's always the thing you don't know that proves the fly in the ointment. I suppose we could find out?"

"Of course we could," I said. "I'll ask my tobacconist. I'll be wanting some 'baccy in the morning." But I forgot all about it and it was not until we interviewed Mr. Baxter that we solved the puzzle. "What exactly," I went on, "does the two hundred pounds buy? the stock and fittings and all the rest of it?"

May nodded a little dubiously; but her father put in, "Shouldn't think so; it's more likely to be the price of what they call the good-will. Always strikes me as a bit funny that. *Whose* good will? for example. Not the customers, for a newcomer's got to get that. Not the vendor's for he hasn't any. I reckon it's one of those mumbo-jumbo terms like

E & O E; trespassers will be prosecuted; by order; home-made; Olde English; accept no substitute and a lot more. However, there's plainly two hundred pounds to be paid at least—”

“What d'you mean by *at least*, Father?” May asked a trifle warmly.

“Well, my dear, I've always found you have to pay more than appears on the surface; that there's usually a catch somewhere; and unless I'm much mistaken that s.a.v. twaddle is the catch here. But no need to go into that yet. Point is d'you think it's the sort of thing you want? the sort of business you can run successfully? and is Storhaven the sort of place you can live in? Holiday resorts are all right for holidays but what about the eight months in the year when there's nothing but seaweed, seagulls, a smell and a nasty East wind?”

“I've lost count of your points, Father,” said May, “but I think Richard and I are agreed it's the sort of business we could run profitably.” She looked over to me and I nodded. “The chief point is, therefore,” she went on, “whether Storhaven's a nice place. And we can only find that out by going to see. I propose we go down to-morrow and look at it.”

“That's the spirit,” I laughed. “To-morrow's the first of March and any place that looks passable in March must be a paradise most of the year.”

“Well, that's settled then. I suppose we'll have to pay rates over and above the rent. It's a pity the advertisement's so vague about essentials.”

“They always are, my dear, from the purchaser's point of view,” Uncle Fred smiled; “but not from the vendor's; he's quite clear what he wants.”

“Rates won't be much,” put in Aunt Alice; “they never are in those pok—those tiny places; you see there's no drainage and no—”

“No *what?* Mother,” May cried in dismay.

"Drainage and gas and water, my dear," went on Aunt Alice, plainly enjoying her revelation; "but after all lamps are—"

"Nonsense, Mother!" May interrupted; "of course there'll be gas and the rest of it. D'you think visitors would go to a place without drainage, for example?"

"Visitors 'll go *anywhere*, my dear," rejoined her mother, with a sort of placid triumph that was exasperating; "why, when we went on our honeymoon, and your Father will tell you the same, we stopped for two weeks—"

"That'll do, Mother," May interrupted with a laugh that showed no trace of irritation; "if you once begin on that we'll never get to bed to-night. We'll have to wait and see about drainage and so on."

"Take my advice, my dear," said her father, "and if there's no drainage and only well-water avoid the place like the plague. As your mother says, we've had some of that. You can rub along yourselves no doubt, but when the children begin to come along you'll wish yourselves anywhere but there. It may be pretty and a rising resort and all the rest of it but if it hasn't a good drainage system, phew!" and he spread his hands expressively. "What's that poem about a loaf of bread and a jug of wine in Paradise, my boy?" turning to me with a chuckle.

*"A loaf of bread a jug of wine and thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness
And Wilderness were Paradise enow—"*

is that it?" I said.

"I expect so, my boy. The loaf of bread's all right and the wine for those that like it and I dare say the thou, as long as she stopped singing occasionally, but the rest's all my eye. No, my boy, the man who wrote that didn't go far enough; not by a long chalk. It ought to run: *A loaf of bread a jug of wine, thou, gas, main drainage and company's water and any Wilderness will suit me A1.*"

"And the devil take the rhyme, eh?" I laughed.

"Rhyme's the curse of poetry, my boy. It leads poets up all the wrong turnings and makes 'em bark up all the wrong trees. A man who's really got something to say says it in plain prose. It's my opinion all poets are woolly-witted and never being quite clear about what they mean they naturally prefer a form of writing that the average man can't make head or tail of. Take all the great writers——"

"We're not going to do anything of the sort, Father," May laughed; "we haven't time. I dare say you're right about drains and wells but we'll wait till we get to the stream before we cross it. I think myself it's time we had supper."

"I suppose," Uncle Fred said, his manner hesitant, diffident, for the first time during the discussion, "you two young people are all right for funds?"

I was about to blurt out quite frankly that I'd next to nothing and that May was putting it all up when she caught my eye, frowned and then said, "We've enough, I think, Father." And then, at his rather hurt expression, she went on, "We've over three hundred pounds between us and that should——"

"It won't do anything of the sort, my dear!" Aunt Alice broke in with surprising vehemence; "there's the two hundred and those letters which might mean anything and then you'll have to furnish and three bedrooms and two rooms downstairs can't be furnished for nothing, and even if you only furnish one bedroom you'll have to as soon as the children——"

"Easy, Aunt Alice," I laughed; "we shan't be having children next week, y' know. Let's keep to present troubles."

"You'll be surprised how quickly they come, Richie," she retorted, nodding her head; "still, as you say, best let bygones be bygones."

"Richard didn't say anything of the kind, Mother," May laughed; "don't be so absurd. Let's have supper now, I'm tired of talking. Richard and I'll go down to Storhaven to-morrow

and then when we get back, if it's not too late, we'll go into it again."

"Best plan, my dear, I'm sure," observed her father. "So let's have supper. But," again with that touch of diffidence, "I'd like you to bear in mind that if you find you like Storhaven and it's a good business and you're likely to be happy and comfortable there, but that s.a.v. stuff and other things are more than you can afford, why then, my dear," nodding and smiling at May and then looking over to me, "just bear in mind as I said that I'm your father and I'm not exactly destitute and that a cheque's the most sensible form a wedding present can take. *Twiggy-vous?*"

May laughed happily and getting up went over to her father and kissed him, a demonstration so rare on her part that it seemed to me there was more than a touch of embarrassment in his return of the caress. And certainly his, "*That's* all right, my dear! I thought someone said something about supper?" lacked his usual easy jocosity.

The approach to Storhaven by rail was through a long cutting whose steep sandstone banks were covered with gorse, heather and wire-weed. As the train emerged and began climbing the slope into the small station the town came so abruptly into view that one had the impression that it had just been catapulted out of space to its position at the top of the long hill leading up from the station. That first sudden view was a very favourable one. The place looked clean and brightly-coloured with its red roofs and clumps of trees already greening. The sun was shining brightly and away to the north the German Ocean stretched very bright and sparkling and with that delusionary attraction which the sea has for the city-dwellers who come to it for brief holidays.

"Isn't it pretty?" May whispered delightedly as the train drew in to the short narrow platform; "it's a good omen," she went on, pressing my arm as I reached up for my hat and overcoat.

I nodded and smiled. "First impression certainly A1." I said. "It's a tidy stretch from the station to the town by the look of it. We'll walk up, I suppose? And what about some grub? I'm famished. Next time we come we'll have a meal on the train."

"All right, darling, so we will; or *you* shall, anyhow. I never feel hungry on a train and I always think the food poor, and if one doesn't eat meat there doesn't seem much else."

"That's because you're not hungry. Hope there *is* somewhere we can get a decent meal." By now we were out of the station and had turned into the long straight road leading up to the town and had already realised that pretty as Storhaven looked in the sunshine it had, anyhow on that March day, other qualities less agreeable; an east wind was blowing fiercely and blusteringly down that long road, snatching roughly at coats, hats and skirts, making the eyes water and the cheeks tingle and somehow seeming to penetrate to one's skin and then dig down into the very marrow of one's bones.

"Oh, blast this!" I said to May, clutching desperately at my bowler which nearly escaped, "talk about freezing the dead! I hope this isn't a sample of Storhaven's usual weather."

"Of course it isn't," May replied, dabbing at her eyes with a fluttering scrap of handkerchief; "it's the first of March and it's come in like a lion; it's like this everywhere."

"Don't you believe it," I grumbled; "tucked up in bed f'r example you'd—oh, thank God for a sight for sore eyes!" I broke off as we turned the first corner in the long road and were at once among the small houses and cottages, with the wide market-place barely a hundred yards ahead. It was not the market-place which caused my exclamation of satisfaction but the hanging-sign of a comfortable-looking inn *The Duke of Wellington*. "Let's feed," I said; and without waiting for May's reply I had pushed open the big doors and striding up the passage, May in my wake like a dinghy be-

hind a cutter, I was demanding lunch of a fat grave-faced woman in black whom I took to be in authority.

The fat woman, who certainly possessed none of the hospitable if vocal geniality which tradition associates with innkeepers, regarded us both for a full ten seconds in silence. I found that calm, inquisitorial stare embarrassing and infuriating; I jumped to the conclusion that we were, for some reason or another, unwelcome, and was about to tell her bluntly what I thought of her manners and to look elsewhere for that meal which was already beginning to wear a will-o'-the-wisp aspect when the faintest of mechanical smiles creased her fat face for a moment, and she said in a thick, greasy, sing-song voice with a ludicrously long pause between each word, "The dining-room is the second door on the left." And nodding in the direction, as if in necessary corroboration, she turned and left us.

"Not exactly what you could call a warm welcome," I said; "if she's a common type of the Storhaven aborigine we look like having a jolly time; but let's get in and sample the grub and the beer; it can't be worse than Fatty's hospitality."

"It's probably only her way," May rejoined, as I pushed open the door of the dining-room and saw a blazing fire and a short, rather shabby waiter standing beside it reading a paper.

"The first bit of warmth in Storhaven," I said grimly; "let's make the best of it in case the provender's rotten."

The waiter looked up from his paper as we sat down and regarded us for quite five seconds with an expressionless set inquisitorial stare precisely like that of the fat woman's.

"This is getting on my nerves," I whispered to May; "I shall hit someone in a minute; I suppose there's a staring schedule; ten seconds for bosses, five for menials and—and—fifty for the oldest inhabitant and the village idiot!" I ended savagely, as an old, white-haired man and a much younger one, who were seated at the other side of the room, turned

their heads simultaneously and fixed us with a long oafish stare.

"Oh, don't take any notice," May replied, with a little laugh, "I expect it's only their way; a Storhaven characteristic; perhaps everyone does it in Suffolk; don't people say 'silly Suffolk'? it doesn't mean anything and even if it does I could forgive more than that for a lovely fire like this."

"Fire's not too bad," I grumbled; "perhaps the grub 'll be eatable. Those two hogs seem to be doing themselves pretty well. Oh, here comes his highness," as the waiter, after folding up the paper and putting it on the mantelpiece, began a slow and waddling progress in our direction; it was a roundabout route he took and as he came he straightened up napkins, fiddled with cruets and cutlery and plates and adjusted chairs at most of the tables in the meandering line of his approach. But at last he stood beside my chair. I looked up into his face hoping to catch something in the way of an insulting grin which would give me an excuse for an outburst; but his fat, grey face, dark-chinned and heavily creased, was as impassive and expressionless as a ball of lard. His wide-lipped mouth dropped open with something of the effect of a ventriloquist's puppet and in the same sing-song heavy drawl of the fat woman he said, "Good-morning," (although it was well after two o'clock) "there's roast beef and Yorkshire or mutton hot; veal and ham cold; potatoes baked and boiled——"

"Bring the menu," I interrupted; but he went on without apparently noticing the interruption, "spring cabbage, rhubarb tart, baked custard, cheese, cheddar or stilton."

"Thank you," I said sarcastically; "let's have the menu, will you?"

He allowed his slow glance to wander round the room, and, as I live! scratched his head long and noisily before replying, "Well, now, I do believe Mrs. Bates has took it. There's roast beef and——"

"Is it tender?" May put in, either to stem the tide or create a diversion.

"Tender?" his fingers going raspingly back and forth across his chin; "born and bred in Storhaven and killed by Pike," he replied with such satisfaction that the plain statement was evidently meant for a testimonial, and May smiled and said calmly that she didn't eat meat but she'd have baked potatoes and cabbage, but no Yorkshire.

"Spring cabbage," he corrected; "and the tart?"

May nodded. "And I'd like some water," she added.

"I'll have the beef," I said hastily, "*with* Yorkshire. And bring me a pint of beer."

"Old or mild or bitter?" he asked without moving or indeed showing any signs of moving. We'd been half an hour in Storhaven and nearly twenty-five minutes in this damnable inn. I was hungry, thirsty and irritable. "Damnation, bring the lot!" I said, and so loudly that the bovine couple at the other table slowly slewed round their heads for another long stare.

I imagine that I did slightly accelerate the waiter's progress by my obvious anger and within ten minutes the meal was before us. He had also brought and placed beside me a pint of a very dark-looking beer and a pint each of two lighter kinds and I received them with, I trust, an impassivity equal to his own. That rather silly outburst on my part was to give me a reputation in Storhaven which I never lived down; it was a reputation for being a bit queer, for having a screw likely to rattle a bit under my bonnet; one of the easiest of reputations to acquire and the hardest of all to live down, for its implications are impossible to refute.

However, if that pint of mild and pint of old and pint of bitter in separate tankards earned me an absurdly disproportionate reputation for oddness it was good beer and the meal it accompanied was first-rate; first-class food perfectly cooked; and a bill for both of us left sufficient change out of a five-shilling piece to bring a faintly grateful nod from the waiter.

It was therefore in a gay and hearty mood that, shortly after half-past three, we left the cosy inn to find Mr. Baxter.

We had no difficulty in finding the shop. Indeed, as we were shortly to prove, no one ever had difficulty in finding any one or anything in Storhaven, for the whole of the town clustered about the market-place in a rough circle whose longest radius was barely three hundred yards. Baxter's shop was opposite the small Town Hall, faced north and had as immediate right-hand neighbour A. Goble, Fruiterer and as left R. Daffey, Fishmonger. The western end of the market-place narrowed into the High Street or main road running down to the railway station, while the eastern end was a block of four shops, a chemist's, S. Tanner; a butcher's, E. Pike; a men's outfitters, F. Peek and a draper's, T. Foss. Farther east, and running parallel to this block, was a row of houses looking out over Stor Bay. To the left of the Town Hall as one faced it was *The Lord Nelson* tavern and to the right a baker's and confectioner's, P. Maybrick. In the centre of the market-place was a horse-trough and a big pump surmounted by a lamp. As we passed this erection I thought it ominous for our hopes of a water-supply and was about to call May's attention to it when she cried, "Oh, look! there's our shop," and pointed to the rather dingy reality of our bright dreams. "Wants a coat of paint," I commented; "but the house isn't a bad size. Now for Baxter and s.a.v."

Mr. Naunton Baxter was a rather insignificant craft to carry so magniloquent a name. He was short, thick-set and dark, rather bald and decidedly fifty-ish; he wore a black patch over one eye and had a too ready smile considering the brown ruins of teeth it disclosed. But what he lacked in physical attractions he made up for in a superb optimism which bore him along on a flowing tide of volubility and threatened to sweep us along in its wake. He was clearly an uxorious and reckless husband for the shop and house seemed littered with children. His partner and abetter in this wild

proliferation was audibly ubiquitous but only appeared once during the interview.

I do not remember all Mr. Naunton Baxter's long discourse but here and there fine fat phrases stood out from the stream like the black nobs of boys bathing; and even now I can hear them voiced so ecstatically in the Suffolk sing-song. "It's a gold-mine, Mr. Carden, and I'm giving it away . . . fed, clothed and comforted thirteen of us on the fat of the land, the fat of the land, sir . . . a clinking business, stuff sells itself and only two other shops in Storhaven in the same line and they're phoo!" with a wave of a stubby-fingered hand, "ask anyone! . . . retire by the time you're—you're" (pausing to give us an appraising glance) "you're—er—still young and with a nest-egg the Mayor himself would be glad of—healthy spot? healthy? two doctors and two chemists here, that's all, sir; and they're starved; ask anyone; trouble is it's that healthy the old folk never die and so the youngsters have to go away to find jobs and——"

"Are you retiring?" I asked.

"That's it; as you might say; going into Essex; bit of farming for a hobby and to leave to the boys, seven of them, youngest two and eldest seventeen and four girls three to fifteen; all alive and never an ache or pain; that's the air; been born and bred in London and how many'd 'a been alive now? Say two."

It was about twenty minutes to four when the interview began and at half-past five Mr. Baxter was still in spate, although there had been a brief interval when Mrs. Baxter, a big scrawny, tawny-haired woman, whose body bore plain evidence of the joys she had endured, had brought in a tray with tea, thick bread and butter and some buns plainly of her own design and baking and from an old recipe handed down, her husband said, from a grandmother; the age of the document must have made it partially illegible. And the whole of that torrent of words contained next to nothing of any practical value. I caught May's eye and decided to come

down to facts. "What, by the way, does s.a.v. mean in your advertisement?" I asked.

"S.a.v.? Stock at value. You take all the stock over, and it's in first-class condition, at its market value, at what it cost me, allowing for depreciation, if any. That's simple enough. Run through the books and could give you a price all-in in a few minutes; well, say half an hour. In fact, I could give you a rough, a rough, mind you," his one bright eye searching our faces, "estimate now." He paused, and I tried to hold the agile glance of that one eye but failed lamentably.

"Yes," May said coolly, "and what is the estimate?"

"Say two-fifty—er—roughly."

"What!" I exclaimed angrily, before May could speak, "two hundred and fifty pounds for that!" with a jerk of my thumb in the direction of the shop window; "why, hang it all, man! from what I saw as we came in fifty'd be nearer the mark."

He smiled with expansive amiability. "New to the trade, I can see. It don't look much, I'll allow, but you'd be surprised at its value."

"We're already surprised," May put in tartly; "we'll have a valuer."

"A what—er—er—ma'am?"

"A valuer."

"Please yourselves, of course, but why go to that expense? Come and see the stuff now; come and see it and I'll get the books; and when we've been through it all, why, we'll talk figures again."

At seven o'clock we were still haggling over the s.a.v., which had come down to one hundred and fifty pounds, in Mr. Baxter's phrase, "My last word and daylight robbery of my wife and children." At my suggestion and expense beer was brought from *The Lord Nelson* and the discussion went on. Nothing could stem Mr. Baxter's volubility, lessen his optimism (for us) or darken his bright smile; and against this triple-proofed armour my shafts of temper and May's

searching probes were equally useless. But I imagine the beer (for he was a thirsty little fish) proved a more powerful weapon than any of ours; the heavy chill atmosphere of barter gave way to a genial warmth of an almost fraternal quality and as the church of St. Mary's struck eight we were blotting our signatures to an agreement by which we took over the tobacconist's and newsagent's business of Naunton Baxter, Market Place, Storhaven, Suffolk, from March 25th, 1901, paying one hundred and seventy-five pounds ten shillings for the good-will and one hundred and fifteen pounds twelve and sixpence for the s.a.v. These odd shillings and the sixpence are the measure of the intensity of the battle. The premises were owned by a Mr. Hubert Oakes, a retired miller, and the rent was fifteen shillings a week plus rates which Mr. Baxter said at first were a bagatelle and, on being pressed, "Well, say five bob a week and we're on the safe side." Storhaven had, we learned to our immense satisfaction, gas, company's water and a main drainage system. It was this information which proved the deciding factor for us. "There's been talk of having electricity in the town," Mr. Baxter added; "and," he went on with a smiling enthusiasm we discounted at sight, "if you ask me it'll be all cut and dried by the end of the year and as cheap as dirt."

We had, of course, missed the last train back to London and so returned to *The Wellington* for supper and bed. I suggested to May that we might as well stay the night as Mr. and Mrs. Carden, and I was amazed at the warmth with which she had refused to do anything of the kind. I was not only amazed but hurt, and seeing this she softened and said more gently, "It wouldn't do at all, Richard. They'd find out sooner or later that we weren't married at the time 'and well, you know what these little places are. Besides," pressing my arm affectionately, "I'd hate that sort of thing now until we're married. It was different the—the—other time. Don't you see that, darling?"

I didn't; it seemed a splitting of hairs to me. But I saw

clearly enough that it would have been a silly thing to do and I therefore laughed and stooping to kiss her at a conveniently dark spot said, "Of course I understand; I was only half-serious; didn't really expect you to agree; must have caught some of Baxter's optimism; but it would have made a jolly ending to a trying day. But, as you say, it wouldn't do at all."

Our return to town began a rush which it seems to me in recollection lasted without intermission until we were married on Thursday, April the eighteenth, at the Maryfields Register Office. When we had taken over the business from Baxter he had agreed to remain until the week ending April the twentieth, *as it was, May considered, impossible for us to clear up our affairs in town in a shorter period.* She had fortunately given in her month's notice to the A.S.T., but there was much to be done in the way of preparation for our marriage, not least being the purchase of furniture and the hundred and one other things which, May insisted, were necessities. We spent one hundred and fifty pounds at Barings, the big stores in Maryfields High Street. I pointed out to May that with what we had to pay Baxter this not only exhausted our capital but left us with a deficit of something like eighty pounds and we should certainly need something behind us to tide us over the anxious period while we were building-up the business. That it would need building-up neither of us had any doubts. May merely smiled and reminded me of the cheque which was to be her father's wedding-present. "That'll be enough to tide us over any bad time; but I don't anticipate one. I'm looking forward to the work immensely; it's going to be great fun and an exciting adventure."

But already I was unable to see much fun or adventure in the affair and was indeed in a mood of queer despondency about it all; a despondency which became grayer the nearer our wedding-day approached. I did not therefore offer any

comment upon May's enthusiastic prophecy but contented myself with suggesting that she was probably counting upon a cheque much bigger than her father could possibly afford.

"I don't think I'm much given to that sort of optimism," she laughed; "Father'll give us what he can afford and it'll be a nice little sum. Guess?"

"A hundred. Two at the outside."

"Three at least and if it's four I shan't be surprised."

It was in fact five, and at the wedding-breakfast to which only the four of us sat down, when Uncle Fred passed it over to us in a long blue envelope he said very genially, "Now you needn't try to get a squint at it, my boy, when no one's looking; it's for five hundred pounds and it's the very least I can do for the two of you; I only wish it were more; and I might as well remind you both while I think of it that if the time should come when a hundred or two would make all the difference you've only to ask it; and if you don't ask you'll be two very silly young fools."

I remember my surprise at that generous gift but little else remains very vividly in my memory of that day; I was profoundly unhappy, filled with misgivings, and I drank heavily both before and during the meal in an endeavour to raise my spirits. Time and again I found myself looking at May and finding it impossible to believe that I had married her, that she was my wife; and each time as I withdrew my glance it was to add one more grain of aversion to the little heap already in my mind. Love her? It was no question of that at all; if only I had just not loved her, had liked her and admired her, all would have been well; but I knew then that there was something in May that repelled me, that warred against something in myself, that might one day turn my aversion into hate or drive it underground into more subtle torments; and I wondered, too, if one day she might not suddenly discover that queer something in myself and be repelled and her love turned to loathing. But over and above all things that day and that night Barbara haunted me; I saw

her, heard her dear voice and her sweet alluring laughter; I could not escape from her; she sat beside me in May's place and later lay in my arms.

Uncle Fred, as the feast ended, delivered a comic valediction. Or the impression remains in my memory that it was comic. I was very drunk and laughed uproariously. One sentence clamped itself on to my fuddled mind. "Marriage," he said, with jocose sententiousness, "is, as you've heard before, not all beer and skittles but," and he winked at Aunt Alice and dropped a hand to pinch her cheek, "it has its moments."

There was to be no honeymoon. "Storhaven in April will be honeymoon enough," May had said happily. We were, then, to travel down to Storhaven the day after the wedding and I suggested that we should sleep at the *Great Eastern Hotel* to be handy for the ten o'clock train from Liverpool Street Station the next morning. But May didn't want that at all. She wanted to sleep at 16 Angel Lane that night and amazingly (at least to me) had arranged that we should sleep in her old bedroom. I don't know why it seemed amazing to me; had we slept in my bedroom I imagine it would have somehow seemed just as odd. It was, I thought, one of the things newly-married people didn't do; they always went away at once. But May plainly thought differently and had made up her mind about it and neither her mother nor father appeared to think it an unusual proceeding. If they did they hid it well; I, at any rate, was to hear what was probably the true explanation of the arrangement.

By bedtime I was sobered and having burnt all my boats and suffered all I was capable of suffering, or so I imagined, I was prepared to play my part of the passionate lover. As May lay in my arms, caressing me, gently stroking my face and hair, she told me in a voice so low that I did not catch every word that often and often after she had fallen in love with me and until she knew that I was in love with Barbara she used to keep awake until after I had come in and that

as soon as I came upstairs and went into my bedroom she would lie hoping I would come into her room and make love to her and that as time went on she began to will it with all her strength. "I would lie stretched out upon my back," she whispered, "my hands clenched, my eyes shut tight, and will and will and will you to come in, holding my breath so long that I often nearly fainted."

"Why did you hold your breath, you goose?" I asked gently, bending over her to brush her cheek with my lips.

"I'm not quite sure. I think I thought it made my will the stronger. But," so softly that I scarcely heard, "you never came."

"You poor mite! It never even entered my head."

"Not once, Richard?"

"Not once."

"And I used to try to send the thought into your mind. The hours and hours I tried to do that."

"You wicked wanton! Doesn't it show you what footle this telepathy and will-power stuff is?"

"Does it, darling?" with a happy laugh. "I don't think so. I'm sure it made you fall in love with me in the end."

"That's worse footle still. D'you know what made me fall in love with you?"

"No, Richard," softly, very gravely; "tell me."

"Why these," I said, kissing her eyes; "and this," kissing the tip of her nose. And then I kissed her lips and her breasts and ran my hand slowly and caressingly from shoulder to knee; "just all of you, darling," I whispered; and I drew her almost roughly into my arms as Barbara stepped out of the darkness and laughed and lay down beside me as if she watched; and at the supreme moment as in my dream, it was Barbara and not May whose body thrilled and quivered beneath my own.

May fell asleep long before I did; fell asleep is literally true; she fell into sleep like the dropping of a shutter. And when I was sure that she slept I withdrew myself gently from

her arms and moved away from her and turning over upon my back lay a long while staring up at the dim ceiling. I thought of that strange fancy that had come to me with that passionate desolating dream, the fancy that seemed so linked with my certainty that May had conceived at that first embrace. Foolish as that wild fancy was the certainty was no less foolish. As May had said nothing to me I had asked her a few days before our marriage and she had laughed and said of course she was not going to have a baby. And when I said "Are you *sure?*" she replied, "Of *course* I'm sure." But I had persisted and said, "You can't be sure, can you? Some women—" but she had interrupted me, laughing again, and giving me an odd glance whose meaning was dark to me, if it had a meaning, and is no less dark now unless I am to believe my own bitter accusation against her years later. And with that odd glance she had said, "But I *am* sure, you old stupid."

We reached Storhaven just before two the following afternoon to find grey skies, torrential rain, wind and a stormy sea. Under that unpropitious sky all the colour seemed to have drained from the place and as we walked slowly up the long straight road to the market-place, May half-hidden behind her struggling umbrella, my head stooped to the wind, and the rain trickling down under my upturned collar, my mind was invaded by a slow depression which deepened as we neared the shop and reached a nadir of gloom as I stood at the shop-door fumbling for the key and staring through the lowered yellow blind at the stock, that s.a.v. over which we had fought the humiliating struggle with Baxter. The wards of the lock were stiff or rusty and the key would not turn. This final irritation was too much for my temper. "O, come up, blast you!" I shouted, wrenching at the key and putting my shoulder to the door which suddenly opened and shot me into the dismal den of May's high hopes and great adventure. She followed me in and shut the door and

tuned to me with a light in her eyes and a smile upon her lips. "Our home, Richard," she said softly and put her arms about me and held up her face. I kissed her, holding her a moment in my arms; but there was little warmth in my embrace and I think she felt this and drew away from me and went bustling through into the back of the shop, leaving me staring at the pitiful collection of stuff to the selling of which I suddenly felt I had bound myself as a bondsman for all my days. It all seemed so silly and little and futile this handing over of trumpery rubbish across the counter in exchange for pennies from the musty pockets of oafs and dolts. God, what a life! and what a mad fool I had been. Here I was dead and buried in a wretched little hole, doubly bound for ever, to a petty task and to a woman for whom I had no love.

I heard May go upstairs and presently from various bumps and thumps knew she was busying herself arranging things. Baxter had left that morning and there was a note from him pinned on the counter with reference to various keys and the boy for delivering the newspapers, who had been handed over with the stock. Attached to the note was a balance-sheet of the receipts and expenditure for the last three weeks; the credit balance was £23 gross, net £5. What had happened to the £14 weekly trade the sheet did not mention. I cursed Baxter and shrugging my shoulders went over to the shelves where the library-books were. I took down one or two and glanced at them and tossed them contemptuously on the counter. My glance went to the shelves of tobacco and cigarettes and thence to the stationery. I contemplated the array for some time, meditated beginning an inventory and then, in sudden disgust, abandoned the notion and went upstairs to see if I could help May.

By tea-time May had performed miracles and when she served up a smoking dish of eggs and bacon for me and smiled at me and said brightly, "Sit down, darling, and I hope you're hungry for the first meal in our new home," I

took her in my arms and kissed her and told her she was a marvel and a trump. And at this she laughed happily and then hid her face against mine and whispered, "Are you happy, darling?" and to my amazement, when I made her look at me, she was crying. "You old stupid!" she exclaimed at my startled expression, "it's only because it's all so wonderful."

After tea the rain ceased, the skies cleared and the sun came out and for the first time since our arrival my depression lifted completely. I lit my pipe and went for a stroll upon the cliffs. The wind had gone away to a mere breath and the sea seemed less rough and ugly under the bright sunshine. Fisherman were busy on the beach and children were playing about the boats drawn up above the tide-mark. Gulls were rising and falling over the water, screaming shrilly, and the shingle at each suck-back of the waves burped loudly but not unmusically. I stood a long while looking down upon that attractive picture and presently sat down upon the grass at the verge of the cliff. I smoked pipe after pipe and let my thoughts do what they would. Perhaps after all it wouldn't be so bad; there might be compensations; weren't there always? and in any case, I'd crossed my river now and the bridge was down; it was impossible to turn back; hopeless even to look back. I'd have to make the best of it; there might be unexpected happiness ahead; what a damned good sort May was; I owed it to her to see she had a square deal; life at Storhaven would perhaps prove something more than tolerable. I suddenly remembered how much there was to do in the shop and the house and had a vision of May busy about half a dozen tasks at once, as I knew she would be at that very moment. I jumped to my feet and set off briskly towards the market-place and abruptly the thought came piercingly: if only it were Barbara there in that fusty shop. But I thrust it away and for once won. It wasn't Barbara but May, my wife; it was she who was there; the woman I had married; my partner; loyalty to the strict letter was the

least I owed her and would pay her; and if the spirit were less amenable there was no need for May to know of its rebellion.

We decided not to open, except for newspapers, until the Monday and we spent the whole of Saturday making a complete inventory. I had proposed to myself spending Sunday rearranging the library and making out a list of new books which were sadly needed and the choosing of which seemed to promise an interesting occupation for some hours. But to my surprise and annoyance, after breakfast on Sunday morning, May said, "The morning service here begins at eleven; you'll be ready, won't you, darling?"

"Ready for church!" I gasped, "Good Lord, May, you don't propose going to church here, do you? I haven't been inside one since I was a kid."

May smiled but there was a frown on her forehead. "Then I'm afraid you'll have to begin again, darling."

"But dam' it all, May," I expostulated, "it's sheer hypocrisy; you know I don't believe——"

"I know; I'm sorry you don't believe and I'm sorrier still that it'll be necessary for you to go since that *will* be hypocrisy, as you say; but go we'll have to, although I should have gone in any case," she added surprisingly; "You must see, Richard, that for you not to go would very likely in a small place like this antagonise most of our customers. You *do* see that, darling, don't you?"

I nodded. It was going to be more of a degrading slavery than I'd bargained for. "But not morning *and* evening, May," I protested.

"I'm afraid so," she replied slowly; "that is, if the others do."

I was about to say, "Blast the others!" when a comforting thought saved my outburst. "Yes, I see that, May," I said mildly, as if surrendering all along the line, "but it'll mean we'll have to drop the Sunday paper side of the business; no doubt the boy's all right, but you can imagine

what he'd be like left to his own devices; and then he'd have to serve in the shop, for I've no doubt the two other tobacconists are open on Sunday, at least, during the morning; but, of course——"

"I hadn't thought of that," May interrupted gravely; "Sunday morning service is out of the question for both of us." And then lightly, "We'll have to be strictly regular at evensong to make up. But anyhow to-day we'll attend both; the boy can do the papers for once himself."

Having won a not unimportant victory I was not disposed to bicker over a small matter and that bright warm Sunday May and I attended both services at St. Mary's church for the first and only occasion during our life at Storhaven.

CHAPTER VII

SHAKING DOWN

THAT first summer at Storhaven was, all things considered, a fairly prosperous one and before its end our weekly turnover averaged the fourteen pounds of Baxter's specious advertisement and showed a tendency to rise. Our net profit was round about four pounds a week but renewal of stock and inside repairs and decorations to the house and shop had made a large hole in our remaining capital. However, without undue optimism, it was possible to take a bright view of our prospects. Baxter had run a small confectionery sideline and this, after considerable discussion, we decided to retain for the present; it consisted chiefly of the cheaper brands of boiled sweets, and while it brought plenty of customers into the shop they were mostly children with only a halfpenny to spend and an eye which watched the scale-pan so avidly and hopefully that whenever May served them the transaction was more of a debit than a credit one; with the arrival of the summer visitors we added boxes of chocolates to the stock and did quite well with them.

I soon found the newspaper side a nuisance and May took this over, fitting it in with her household work and leaving me to give all my attention to the books and tobacco. We might have let both our spare bedrooms during the season for a pound a week each, but neither May nor I thought it worth while, at least just then.

The two other tobacconists and newsagents, George Paston, whose shop was in King Street, running south-south-east out of the market-place, and Samuel Farley, at the lower end of the High Street, were by no means the negligible rivals of

Baxter's scornful description; both businesses, indeed, were considerably more prosperous than ours; but with the influx of the visitors we began slowly to catch up with them, an improvement entirely due to our library which I had re-organised at a cost of nearly sixty pounds, a heavy expenditure which at the time May had thought reckless and foolish. But certainly the results justified it, for while both our competitors ran small libraries they contained mostly trash, and very dilapidated volumes of trash at that, I had laid out my sixty pounds not only in new novels, but in classes of books not usually found in seaside libraries, biographies, verse, books of travel and letters, and whether because of what May called pretentious snobbery in the visitors or because the books satisfied a real need, the innovation proved a sound investment and Carden's Library during the season lent out more books in a day than its rivals combined did in a week. Further, our terms were, I think, better than theirs and certainly occasioned less work, for while they charged threepence a volume for two days we had a flat rate of a shilling a week for which subscribers could have as many books as they liked, but not more than one at a time, although they could change that one as often as they desired. By the end of the season the library receipts had paid for all the new books and showed a balance of over fifteen pounds. But the library was, of course, indirectly profitable; for people who came for books frequently bought tobacco, cigarettes, sweets and stationery, and not a few transferred their newspaper custom from one of our competitors to us. This, by the bye, brought about the first breeze between myself and one of the Storhaven aborigines, George Paston. He stopped me on the cliff and bluntly accused me of stealing his customers. He was a little, thin man with pale blue eyes and a long moustache which quivered agitatedly as he talked; he had clearly worked himself into a passion in order to face a job he didn't care about or had been goaded into by his wife; he was pallid and on edge and, as I say, his moustache signalled his agitation. I

have no doubt the matter could have been settled amicably (on the financial side it was, of course, not worth troubling about), but I was, I suppose, in no good humour, and he seemed such a grotesque little creature, for all the world like a bedraggled terrier yapping at a Great Dane, that I plunged my hands into my trousers pockets and looked down at him with an intentionally exasperating smile which flustered him so that he came to an abrupt stop and then ended truculently, "That's all I've got to say, Mister; see what I mean, I hope." I allowed my smile to expand into a positive grin. "Rubbish!" I said; and taking out my pouch began to fill my pipe.

"Rubbish, is it! rubbish, is it!" he said, flushing.

I nodded. "Know why your customers come to me? Because they get better service. Now you trot back home; you can't afford to waste time walking about the cliff." And after slowly lighting my pipe I nodded to him and with another smile I turned on my heel and left him and made my first enemy in Storhaven. He seemed a negligible little runt and the affair of no importance; it certainly would not have mattered had I made no further enemies; but I was to make only too many enemies in Storhaven and too few friends.

But apart from its financial side, the library was a great asset in other and far more valuable ways, at least to me, for it brought me into touch, if only for a few months, with literate men and women and gave me, if not congenial companionship (for I was, after all, only a shopkeeper), at any rate congenial conversation. I found it a very pleasant way of spending the first hour or so after breakfast, talking tobacco and books with some intelligent customer. Those hours come back to me memorably happy, those summer-morning hours I stood behind the counter, pipe in mouth, discussing Wells, Bennett, Shaw, Tennyson, Lamb and Hazlitt with some devotee, while without the sun shone brilliantly and

the market-place was gay with brightly-clad women and children.

If to the library I owed, indirectly, my first enemy in Storhaven, it brought me my first friend among the natives, David Vosper, the only child of Storhaven's late chief builder and decorator, Harry Vosper. That friendship was a curious one, for David was physically a type I find almost repellent; he was under-sized and effeminate-looking, with a thin reedy voice; worse still, he was consumptive, a sick little rat and usually looked it; he was a black-and-white artist of genius, but did not succeed in selling much of his work, for there was a macabre perverted quality about it which, I imagine, made it difficult to market; while this infuriated him (and his temper was at times outrageously violent), it did not affect him financially, as he lived with his mother, who had sold the business and was very comfortably off. He came into the shop one morning in July accompanied by several of the visitors. While Storhaven and its natives looked upon him as part mountebank, part lunatic and treated him accordingly, knowing nothing and caring nothing about his genius (for such indeed it was) a number of the visitors, aware of his reputation in art-circles, sought him out and lionised him as far as was possible with anyone so tetchy, moody and sensitive; in consequence, during the summer months he spent most of his leisure in more congenial company than Storhaven could supply from its native resources. Storhaven was reckoned something of a beauty-spot and in the season never lacked some four or five painters in search of inspiration; and with these David hobnobbed, and it should have been clear to Storhaven, from the attitude of these fellow-craftsmen towards him, that he was a son of which any town might be proud; but few things of that sort were clear to Storhaven. He came into the shop, as I said, one morning in July with two men and a very pretty young woman. They were all talking and laughing together, and when one of the men, who had been in before and had

chatted with me about books, asked if I'd anything I could recommend, Vosper put in, "That's a new way for you to choose books, isn't it, Jimmy?" he replied, "Not when there's an expert handy," with a nod in my direction. I offered him Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris*, and this caused Vosper to say, "I didn't know you had that sort of stuff here; you must be an optimist." And with that the talk again became general; but this time it included me. So began my friendship with David Vosper, one of the most extraordinary men I have ever met. Later, he introduced me to a crony of his, Tom Batley, an ex-sergeant of the Royal Marines, known to nearly everyone as Sarge. Batley had a small pension, and his wife, who owned the one large boarding-house in Storhaven, Bay View, also contributed to his support, which was an expensive pleasure, owing to his habits, especially his love of gambling. Batley was as big as I was, with a dark heavy face and a black drooping moustache. He was something over forty, while Vosper was about my own age or perhaps a year or two more—I never knew exactly.

If George Paston were my first enemy he did not long occupy that distinctive position unaccompanied, for our immediate neighbours, Robert Daffey, the fishmonger, and Arthur Goble, the fruiterer, soon joined him; and again the fault was no doubt my own. Both these neighbours and their wives, as well as a number of others, had, during that first summer, made tentative approaches of friendliness only to be met with rebuff. "They're an oafish lot," I said to May, "and if we start hobnobbing with them we shall only be lugged into dull calls and such deadly amenities as whist-drives, concerts and lantern-lectures and the Lord knows what else, especially during the winter." And May, to whom I was then all-sufficient and all-sufficing, readily agreed. And so we kept to ourselves and except for our attendance at the Sunday evening service at St. Mary's, mixed with no one; it would be nearer the truth to say that May mixed with no one, for presently, as my acquaintanceship with Vosper and

Batley ripened into friendship, I began to drop into the bar parlour of *The Lord Nelson* several evenings in the week, and later every evening.

This keeping ourselves more or less aloof was after all, however, a negative affair; but in the matter of Goble and Daffey it bore the positive aspect of active dislike on their part, for which I was, as I have admitted, mainly responsible. I looked upon Daffey's shop as an abominable nuisance, disgusting my nostrils with its nightly smell of frying fish "in rancid oil," as I remarked loudly to May one evening when our windows were wide open and anything we said was, I knew, audible next door. For days after this sally of mine I caught Daffey glowering at me through his smudgy window. He was a dark fat man of middle-age with an unhealthy, grey, greasy face and a wheezy voice. I returned his glance with a stare of bland amusement which he must have found infuriating, and for several nights, as soon as he began his frying, I ostentatiously went the round of the house shutting the windows with vast bangings. He had five or six small children, and when one of them, a slippery-nosed urchin of about nine, came into our shop for a pennyworth of sweets I gave him thumping good measure and told him he could keep his penny if he'd ask his father not to fry when the wind was in the west. The bribe seduced him to that small service, but I imagine the poor brat paid dearly for his folly since he never entered the shop again, and whenever afterwards I met him in the town he bestowed upon me a fair imitation of the parental glower.

The antagonising of Goble, the fruiterer, was an even sillier business. He was a tall, sandy, taciturn man, grotesquely thin and bony, with immense hands like flappers and splay feet obviously tormented by bunions unless there be another explanation for the many holes he had cut out of his boots. His wife was short, fat and dark, with a round chubby face, in appearance, therefore, easy-going and good-natured; and yet she was a shrew for ever nagging him or the three children

in a high-pitched whine which must often have goaded him to the point of murder and the children, in wish, to matricide. And the core of our enmity was that I pronounced his name Gobble, the first time inadvertently, but he corrected me so surly that for a long while I persisted in that silly mispronunciation both to him, his wife, and in conversation with others. Eventually either the joke staled or I grew tired of being corrected by the townspeople and I Gobled him with the rest; but by then the mischief was done.

There were three public-houses in Storhaven, *The Duke of Wellington*, the scene of our first meal in the town and of my exploit with the three tankards, *The Lord Nelson*, and *The Red Cow*. The first ranked as a hotel, the second was an inn, and the third a small dingy place in King Street with a licence for beer only. The patrons of these three houses fairly well marked off the town into its social strata; fishermen, labourers and the general run of workmen used *The Red Cow*; the nabobs, such as the Mayor, the schoolmaster, the town clerk and the two doctors, frequented *The Duke of Wellington*, while the rest went to *The Lord Nelson*, whose bar parlour, as snug a one as any I have been in, was usually crowded. The visitors shared their patronage between the hotel and the inn with a faintly snobbish predilection for the former. Vosper occasionally went into *The Duke of Wellington*; I rarely, Batley never. *The Lord Nelson* was our real house of call, and if Vosper were not with us he usually turned up before the evening was out; it was a free house owned by Harry Bender, and the like of his bitter beer and strong ale I shall never taste again, for such magnificent stuff is no longer brewed. Even the audit ale of his college which Alister introduced me to many years later seemed to me, in comparison, the windiest swipes; but perhaps by then it was beyond the potency of ale to touch me.

Usually Vosper, Batley and I sat at one of the tables in the big bar or on one of the settles that ran round the bay windows, and joined in the general conversation; but occa-

sionally when Vosper was feeling more than ordinarily off-colour or his nerves were particularly edgy, he would say he couldn't stand the cackle and we would then go to one of the four small sitting-rooms at the back. Card-players made use of these rooms and often kept up the play long after closing hours and for surprisingly high stakes. We generally managed, however, to get one to ourselves and to keep it for the evening and, indeed, now and then till far into the early hours, when the last gambler had yawned himself off home to reckon up the results of his night's play. There was at that time in Storhaven a laxity on the part of the police in regard to such matters, a laxity which to-day seems unbelievable. But the police were not to blame (if it be a matter for blame), the full personnel being only a superintendent, a sergeant and a constable. The superintendent, unlike the traditional ghosts, did not walk, and since the sergeant considered his duties were chiefly concerned with sampling the good liquors, Hooper, the constable, a family man of immense productivity, while preserving the dignity of the law in physique and deportment, trod delicately in the figurative sense, but actually with much heralding clatter and noisy expectation.

Vosper was a great hater, and a waspish tongue aided by a gift for invective rendered that hatred stingingly vocal during his frequent moods of depression. He hated Storhaven and Storhaven people; he hated his sick weak body; he hated his late father ("a weedy, degenerate shrimp," he called him savagely), who had handed on to him not the full strong stream of life which is a child's birthright but a muddy trickling shallow for ever threatening to dry up; he hated and despised (or so it seemed to me) all creeds and faiths both political and religious; and if he did not hate mankind he had little but contempt for men and a dislike for women. Something of these bitingly expressed hatreds was no doubt a pose; but just how much I was never even near to guessing; he was not a man to be read by anyone, nor was there any forecasting what he would be likely to do or say in given

circumstances; he somehow seemed each day to begin life afresh, having buried and forgotten all his yesterdays. I know that sounds fantastic and it is not to be taken too literally, but it does express a quality about him of continual new birth. If I were dubious about the sincerity of all his hatreds I never doubted it in the matter of his dislike of women; he disliked them as companions and, as he himself expressed it with characteristic exaggeration, the mere thought of more intimate relation with them set his whole body shivering with repulsion and disgust. He was not homosexual; not that we knew anything of homosexuality then; we had never heard the word used; we were, of course, familiar with a blunter term which refers to but a small proportion of the whole truth; but there was nothing of that about David Vosper. I thought at the time (and looking back now with a wider, if not a deeper or truer knowledge of life, I still think so) that he was a man in whom the tide of vitality ran so weakly that all its energies were expended by his passion for drawing and nothing remained for the more ordinary emotions. Against this hypothesis may be urged his fiery hatreds; but these were merely vocal hatreds, sounding brass and tinkling cymbals; he had, I imagine, neither the will nor the desire to put them into practice. It was not until years after David Vosper was dead that I heard of Ernest Dowson and read of his life and saw his portrait and I was struck by a striking physical resemblance between the two men and by much that seemed to me to be common in their characters; for with all David's wild invective and furious denunciations there was in all he said and did a strain of weakness, of pathetic futility; his work, like Dowson's, was the strongest thing about him, and that also had about it, as Dowson's had, the fragility of sick things that have not long to live.

What Vosper saw in Batley puzzled me. Between the frail, sickly, under-sized draughtsman of genius and the beefy, burly, sensual ex-marine there seemed no points of contact. But for that matter, what Batley saw in Vosper is equally

puzzling; he may, of course, in the beginning have been flattered by the friendship of a young man who was clearly his superior in every way (Vosper had been to Framlingham School while Batley was barely out of the illiterate class) and who, moreover, was a somebody in the world outside Storhaven; but that was no cement strong enough to hold together in firm friendship two such utterly contrasting types for a dozen years without a break. But attempting to solve this sort of puzzle is hopeless. Vosper liked Bailey and Batley liked Vosper, and that is the simplest way to leave it. And I liked both of them and they liked me. We fitted in, dovetailed somehow or other. A queer trio we made! I was now an inch over six feet, but my weight was well under twelve stone and my big frame gave me a false appearance of gauntness. Batley, but little shorter than myself, was an immense gross fellow of over sixteen stone; Vosper was five feet in height and weighed a bare hundred pounds in his clothes, and of these he wore plenty; his bones, as he said grimly, being marrowless and his blood cold tea. An odd point in our association with the ex-sergeant of marines was that while everyone else in Storhaven called him Sarge he was always Batley to us. Vosper's Christian name was the only one ever used, and that not invariably. Batley addressed us by a variety of odd army terms.

Batley was the frankest man I have ever known (or should it be simplest?). He was as open as the sky and as natural as the sea. I never heard him express shame or contrition, indignation or contempt. He seemed content with life, himself and the world. I look for a word best to describe him and the nearest I can get is serene; but can so beefy a sensualist as Batley be said to be serene? Benign then? Hardly; benignity smacks somehow of the cloth! Perhaps the word doesn't exist. Batley was a fat, healthy and happy animal, and if any of these adjectives be contradictory then Batley was the exception.

It was, I fancy, only the second time I had foregathered

with him and Vosper when I grasped something of his quality from his reply to Vosper's chaff. I think Vosper had called him a fat parasite sucking out the blood of his hard-working wife.

"Parasite, old China, is it?" Batley smiled; "I reckon you're about right. Why not? The wife's fond of me and good cause to be; I'm a loving husband, drunk or sober; she likes keeping me; knows I'm worth it; to have a fine man about the place like me is worth more to her than the bit of extra work and the bit of money. But women are like that; they like waiting on a man and serving him; especially if he is a man and keeps *them* served, as you might say. A woman that a man's taken and made his wife, picked her out of the whole bunch he might have had, that woman, soldier," pointing his pipe stem at me, "owes him gratitude and service to her dying day. *And* they know it, boy! So when my missis keeps me fed and with money in my pocket do I go on m' benders and snivel a lot of thanks? I don't. I take it all as my rights, some of 'em; and I see she has hers too. And I'm boss, too, old comrade. Don't make any error about that. I drive the old four-in-hand *and* I don't have to use the whip. And I don't mind drinking her health; long may she keep it and me." He lifted his tankard and with a grin and a nod to us drained it slowly and gustfully.

I have no recollection of what Vosper said on that occasion, or if I said anything myself; perhaps Batley had said everything possible.

I have a vivid memory of one of Vosper's bitter outbursts during those early days although it must have been some months later than my first meeting with Batley, for the impression in the background of my consciousness is one of familiarity with each other's ways and habits; we were, in brief, approaching the crony stage. It was probably one of Vosper's sick days and some casual remark of mine about fidelity provoked him into an onslaught which spared nothing in the whole range of life. And here, as so frequently with

me when I can call up a scene vividly, I can recollect his words almost with the accuracy of a phonographic record. I omit most of his expletives which, while always rich and apt and expressive, were often too obscene and indecent for the written word, although, as they came tumbling red-hot from his lips, I do not imagine they would have given offence to any intelligent adult.

"Fidelity!" he said irritably; "why do you talk such bloody nonsense, Carden? there's no such thing; it's a myth like all the other noble attributes of humanity; they're all fakes, pretensions, humbugs, from mother-love down (or up) to patriotism; and the only ones that look real enough to deceive a child are just blind instinct, mother-love, for example." He paused to light a cigarette and Batley said affably. "Good for you, old soldier; carry on."

"I was over Palmer's poultry farm yesterday," Vosper went on, "making some drawings, and Palmer showed me the body of a six-weeks' old chick, sizeable little thing just getting a respectable quantity of feather; and the whole back of its head had been pecked away. By its mother. The chick had scratched its poll on a strand of the netting and a drop of blood oozed out. Mother noticed it; pecked at it; liked the taste and proceeded to peck her own child to death; the same child, mark you, which ten minutes before, if you'd gone waddling up too close, Batley, she'd have clucked under her wings to protect, and Carden would have pointed out as a heartening spectacle of mother-love. And it's the same through the whole gamut of life, human and bestial; although bestial's redundant, isn't it? Just alter any balance of nature a trifle and away go all the beautiful attributes you're prating about."

"I like that," I laughed. "I wasn't prating about them. I don't think I've any more illusions than you have, David; but I think you go too far in denying the whole bag of tricks."

He shook his head. "If you prove one false they're all

false. You can't have it both ways. That's what everybody wants to do. People won't face facts; they're afraid of them; people prefer to live in a half-dark paradise of bunkum."

"As long as you're happy, what's the odds?" chuckled Batley.

"Not to you, you fat parasite; d'you think life's just being happy, as you call it? which means, as far as you're concerned, a belly full of grub, a skin full of liquor and a woman in bed with you."

"Well, why not? Can you beat it, soldier, eh? Can you beat it?"

"God! you make me sick. How your wife can stand being clutched by an overblown carcase like you—"

"Loves it, boy; just loves it!" grinned Batley; "your stomach's too delicate, old China, and you think everybody else is like yourself. Don't you believe it. There's nothing queasy about women when you get to know 'em; they like being what you might call natural; it's nuts to 'em, nuts and wine."

"Having coupled with a dozen or so trollops, mostly niggers, you imagine you know women from A to Z," jeered Vosper.

"O' course. All alike, black or white or yellow. Kiplin'—"

"We don't want any of his drum-and-fife droolings. And anyhow, Carden's the book-merchant, not you. If anyone's going to spout, let him do it. Go on, Carden, let's get off the subject of human vileness; I'm sick to death of it. What's the latest smutty novel?"

"Let's stick to your topic a bit longer, David," I said; "you had the first word; you might as well let somebody else have the last."

"A dirty lie; a tradesman's lie; a shopkeeper's lie!" the grin of a provoking schoolboy on his pallid peaked little face; "but go ahead."

"Batley said, 'What's the odds so long as you're happy,' and there's something in it. Look——"

"Oh, *that!* verbal excrement!"

"Just a minute. I was merely suggesting that it was the end that counted and not the means."

"Well? What about it?" He grinned over at Batley. "Our book-hawker's making heavy weather, Batley, my boy; but he'll reach port by the end of the week. Keep those gross ears of yours open; Carden's about to give birth to a gem of knowledge."

"Those fine attributes you say are all bunkum, and I'm not saying they are or they aren't; but I only want to point out that they've inspired some pretty fine actions which *look* genuine, anyhow, and also some pretty fine literature which, on the lowest basis, has given pleasure and——"

"To hell with pleasure."

"All right. But why do you draw?"

"To please myself."

"Then why try to sell it and then swear blue murder when you can't?"

"Vanity, you long-drawn-out yob! But what the hell are you driving at?"

I laughed. "Damned if I haven't forgotten."

"Well, let's have another round," said Batley. "Warn't you going to give us a bit o' Kiplin?"

"That's it!" I cried. "Not Kipling. It was something else. It was Vosper's clap-trap about mother-love reminded me of it." I rummaged in my pockets and drew out a piece of paper.

"Oh, God! dear old Longfellow!" jeered David.

"You're wrong. It's a bit out of the Greek Anthology. I was looking through some of the new books that came down yesterday, and it was quoted for a chapter-heading. It's new to me, but I reckon it's one of the loveliest arrangements of words I've ever seen, not that I'm any authority——"

"Cut the cackle, for God's sake!" put in David, "and puke out the masterpiece."

I unfolded the paper, "And," I went on, "it bears out what Batley and I have been saying——"

"Leave me out, old China," interrupted Batley; "it was old Kiplin' I was talking about; never heard of the other fellow."

"Don't be so bloody longwinded!" Vosper snapped; "we've *some* nous. We grasp your hypothesis that these beautiful attributes have inspired masterpieces; now let's have the example and get it over."

"Here you are, then," I replied, and read out slowly: "*Philip, his father, laid here the twelve-years-old child, his high hope, Nicoteles.*" I looked from Batley to Vosper. "Well?" I said.

"Hard Cheddar!" Batley said, pulling at his pipe and not perhaps so much out of his depth as I thought him.

Vosper nodded. "Yes, it's bloody fine; I came across it years ago at school and it struck me, or else the English master told us it *ought* to strike us; that's the curse of schools; you're never allowed to milk the cow yourself; well, anyhow, I'll take the credit and say it struck me as a masterly arrangement of words and a really moving epitaph; I believe our English master said at the time that the translation was finer than the original Greek. It's by J. W. Mackail. Not knowing Greek, I can't say. Sounds like a lie or why translate it? So paternal love inspired that, did it, Carden?" the mockery returning to his voice; "well, perhaps it did; but no need to get maudlin. And let's talk of something else now, for God's sake! Or let's play solo or talk horses. What's the snip for to-day, Batley?"

It is fantastic nonsense; maudlin nonsense; and yet in looking back upon my life it seems somehow to fall into two periods and into two only: the first up to the time I read out that quotation, and the second all the rest. It is, of course, only in recollection that I have this sentimental fancy, in looking

back over the panorama of my days. It is common enough; I imagine most people in reviewing their life see some trivial incident standing out as saliently, as significantly, in retrospect, as the trivial execution of an inspired and seditious carpenter of Nazareth now stands out, with its symbol of the cross, in human history.

With the end of the season and the departure of the visitors Storhaven, in Vosper's phrase, went into cold storage; it ceased to be a bright little place crowded with gaily-clad women and children; it removed, as it were, its garments of carnival and became itself; and a dull self it was. The shops, almost in a single night, withdrew their window-displays of jolly holiday-stuff and replaced them with work-a-day goods; business slackened, pounds a day dwindled to shillings; the streets became more and more safe for dogs and cats to sleep in and for children to play in; gossip shifted from the romantic if apocryphal sins of the visitors to the more intimate peccadilloes of the aborigines. A dull little hole of a place! and a dull life I began to find it. And more and more I took to ending my day with a pleasant hour or two in *The Nelson* with Vosper and Batley, leaving May very much to her own devices. She made no complaint and, in fact, seemed pleased that I had found congenial companionship. But about the middle of November, looking ahead to the stretch of gloomy winter evenings when May would have a thin time left alone, I broached the matter and was rather surprised and annoyed when she said warmly, "Is *is* rather a pity, Richard, you've rebuffed the proffered friendship of so many quite nice people since we've been here. It's rather lonely sometimes of an evening and I'd welcome a friend dropping in for a chat."

"I rebuffed them!" I exclaimed.

"Well, darling, you did, didn't you? There was the Gobles and the Daffseys—"

"Good God, May! You surely don't want to hobnob with

those boors? Hang it all! when they first began to try to get their noses in you were as keen as I was to slam the door on them. You might be——”

“It’s not only them,” she went on hastily; “but the Pecks are nice people and I’m sure would have been friendly, but you were really rude, you know you were. And then there was the Fosses; Mrs. Foss is quite an educated woman and was ready enough, I know, to be——”

“Oh, good Lord, don’t let’s have a list of them. I thought we’d agreed we didn’t want to mix with the aborigines and go into company and so forth——”

“Well, darling, I *didn’t*, until you did.”

“Oh, that’s it? You don’t like my seeing Vosper and Batley occasionally. A man wants a bit of male society now and then, however——”

“I don’t mind at all, Richard, and it’s unfair of you to say I do. Of course you like to mix with men and go out with them, but don’t you think I’d like to have a woman friend or two?”

“All right. I’m sorry. I thought you were happy enough as we were; but by all means have your friends in.”

“I have to make them first,” with a trace of hardness in her voice.

“Well, that shouldn’t be difficult. I’ve not rebuffed the whole town.”

“It’s not so easy for a woman to make friends in a strange place. She doesn’t go about and meet people like a man. She’s got to depend upon her husband really.”

“I don’t see what you’re driving at, May.”

“You *do*, Richard, surely. It’s plain enough. A man gets about and makes friends and then the wives are introduced and——”

“Oh, *that!*” I laughed. “I don’t fancy you’d hit it off with Mrs. Batley, darling; she’s——”

“I wasn’t thinking of Mrs. Batley. She’s the last person——”

"And Vosper's only his mother, and she's older than Aunt Alice and about as up-to-date as a stage-coach; still, if you'd—"

"If that's all you can suggest," she replied angrily, her face flushing, "you might as well—"

"Damnation, May, be reasonable! You say a man introduces his wife—"

"So he does, when he's decent friends."

"Oh, ho! so that's where the shoe rubs! I thought you said you didn't mind my going out with Vosper and Batley? I knew that was a lie."

"It's not," turning her head away and speaking softly; "you know it isn't, Richard. But I *do* think you might find other friends besides just—"

"Anything to oblige. Who, for example?"

"Well, there's Mr. Packe—"

"The schoolmaster! God in heaven! You don't mean to say you want to get yoked with that slippery-voiced, cadaverous—"

"Don't be so horrid, Richard. Mrs. Packe is an awfully nice little woman and a great reader; she's always in for books, and I'm sure—"

"Well, then, hang it all, May! there's your chance. Can't you—"

"How often do I have anything to do with the books? You've monopolised that side of the business from the beginning and—"

"Very well, then, May; you take it over."

"And give you more time to go drinking and gambling with your two friends in *The Lord Nelson*."

I stared at her blankly. Her face was now white, her lips a tight thin line. She looked plain to ugliness and abruptly I saw in her the shrew that so many women seem to become after marriage. I felt that in a few moments, unless the situation were relieved, we might be swept into one of those

humiliating quarrels which are the first blows struck at the props of domestic happiness, to say nothing of comfort.

"I won't discuss that, May," I replied quietly, "you're upsetting yourself about nothing. I've said I'm sorry you've felt lonely, and I promise you I'll do everything I can to make things brighter for you—even to the extent of cultivating the pompous Packe. There now! don't look so damned shirty."

And suddenly her mood changed and she smiled, perhaps a trifle wanly. "I'm sorry, darling," she said; "I didn't mean to say that; but I've not been feeling quite up to the mark the last day or two——"

"Jerusalem! you're not pregnant, are you?"

"No! you stupid. Wouldn't I have told you if I were? It's only——"

"Oh, I'd forgotten." I went over to her and stroked her hair and bent to kiss her. "Uncle Fred's right about women getting a raw deal, damned if he isn't!" I said gently. "I'm sorry you're seedy, darling."

"I'm not really, you old silly," rubbing her cheek against my hand. "And anyhow, I'm better now. And I don't want you to do anything you don't like. There are plenty of others besides the Packes. There's the Tanners and the Palmers and the Lamberts and lots of others."

"All serene, then! I'll become the perfectly affable little gentleman and you shall become the social centre of Stor-haven. How's that?"

"Splendid. Would you like supper now or when you come in. There's some nice herring I'd cook and keep hot if you'd give me some idea what time——"

"Cook them now, darling, and we'll have it at once and then we'll have a cosy talk round the fire about our coming social campaign and go to bed early. That do?"

"Lovely. There *are* two bottles of ale in the larder. Will they be enough?"

"More'n enough. A loaf of bread, a bottle of beer and thou, eh?"

"And the fish!" she laughed happily.

As a weapon in the perpetual warfare waged between harassed adults and badgering children the saw "early to bed and early to rise" has its uses, although the early to rise might with advantage be omitted; but there is otherwise no virtue in it. The time for bed is when one can no longer keep awake, and that hour with me was becoming an increasingly later one and was usually after midnight; to get into bed before then meant lying awake for an hour which might have been more pleasantly and profitably spent. And certainly that night, long after May had fallen asleep, I lay unable even to drowse, as wide awake and clear-thoughted as at any time during the day. It is true that I lacked the soporific influence of my customary evening half-dozen or so glasses of beer, but chiefly it was my own silly proposal that was to blame. And my thoughts, having nothing else to do, and inspired by May's breathing body touching mine, embarked upon a review of my married life.

It was not a pleasant or a heartening occupation, but it was an honest review which faced the facts without blinking. I didn't love this woman lying beside me; I never had loved her, and there was no possible chance that I ever should; wasn't the balance indeed swaying definitely over from liking to aversion? A hundred things about her were beginning to grate upon me, things I hadn't noticed before, from physical imperfections to irritating habits. There was a good deal of hard sense in Uncle Fred's comparison between flowers and women; it was undoubtedly true that even a beautiful woman came badly out of a close scrutiny; and May had never been beautiful; she could look pretty at times and at others plain to ugliness; and the plain times seemed to be increasing; there was no disguising the fact that whatever small physical attraction she once had for me was entirely gone. Was that why so many of her habits grated on me? Half the truth, perhaps, but not all of it; she seemed indeed to be acquiring

new and damnably unpleasant habits; nagging, for example, and criticism implied or spoken, outspoken, damnably so; the very last thing a man wants is a critic on the hearth or sharing his bed. My marriage was clearly a failure as far as love went; was there another side? a dozen other sides? was it possible to make it a sort of successful business association? a poor sort of makeshift, perhaps, but—an unusual sound broke up the current of my thoughts, but it needed a repetition of the sound before I realised that it was a half-suppressed sob from May. For a moment I felt a surge of anger, almost of hatred against her; why in hell's name would women snivell it was so damned childish, so silly, so futile, so humiliating and degrading; damnation; couldn't May see that? the things women couldn't see! or anyhow, as men saw them. The surge of anger passed quickly and was succeeded by bewilderment; what in God's name was she crying about? She'd been happy enough at supper and after, and when we came to bed. I hadn't the ghost of a notion and realised the folly of looking for one. Instead I turned upon my side and put my arms about her and drew her close, comforting her and kissing her. And presently the reluctant spirit withdrew and the flesh, more easily amenable, obeyed its instinct; but without passion or delight and with only the lees of pleasure.

But before the end of the year, and without any assistance from me, May's hankering after friends and the watery joys of social calls was satisfied; indeed I imagine more than satisfied. The Vicar, the Rev. James Hannah, discovered that she had a fine contralto voice and while all his efforts to persuade her to join the choir were unsuccessful (she pleaded that shop and domestic duties would prevent regular attendance at practice) she very willingly sang at the concerts and whist drives with which the Storhaven middle strata ameliorated the tedium of winter. I learned then for the first time that she had spent two years at the Guildhall School of Music and was inclined to be amazed and rather

hurt that she had never told me about it, until it occurred to me that not having realised her high ambition she preferred not to resurrect those dreams by talking about them; still, one would have thought that a husband might have been placed before personal feelings. Her voice, while not of course a trained one, had considerably benefited by her course at the School and it was decidedly the finest woman's voice in Storhaven, and the Vicar was not slow to exploit it. And so May began to go about a good deal; towards Christmas in fact she was singing four or five evenings a week. This meant a lot of fitting-in and re-shuffling of the work, but I was not disposed to grumble; May was making quite a lot of friends and was plainly excited and happy about it all and in consequence whatever grounds she may have had for feeling aggrieved at my outgoings and incomings disappeared. The year indeed ended on all counts very pleasantly and happily; perhaps not the smallest count being the jump in our turnover during December to a weekly average of twenty-four pounds which, allowing for Christmas week when we took thirty-one pounds, was six or seven pounds more than we had dared to hope but a short time before. I imagine some of the increased business was a direct consequence of May's popularity as a singer and later just as herself; for she kept the friends she made; she was like that; not a common feminine achievement.

CHAPTER VIII

ALISTER

As far as material things went, then, our first year at Storhaven ended well and there seemed no reason why the slow course of prosperity should not continue to rise. But somehow from the very beginning of our second year things went awry; there was nothing marked or definite, no irreparable mistakes or financial disasters, but merely that affairs showed a tendency to drift in the wrong direction. The death of Maybrick, the baker and confectioner, whose shop adjoined the Town Hall, seems in retrospect to be the starting-point of this turn in the tide. His wife had been dead about a year and with his death the business closed down and the shop stood vacant. And then one Monday morning about the middle of April (it was in fact a year to the very day from our opening) the decorators got to work on the shop and about a week later Tom Stannard, the sign-writer, mounted his ladder and began carefully chalking out letters on the fascia. I'd an odd notion that he was continually turning to look over his shoulder at our shop and it seemed to me, watching from a corner of our window, that there was a silly grin on his face. He worked rapidly and within an hour or so the chalked "rough" of the lettering was done and he came down from his ladder and stepping off the kerb cocked up his head to survey his work. And once again as he went back to his ladder he looked over his shoulder and this time the grin was unmistakable. The lettering was too faint to be discernible at that distance and so I strolled across to look at it. A close view certainly startled me but I imagine I managed to retain an air of bland indifference. The rough chalk lettering ran: *F. Goble Newsagent & Tobacconist.*

I walked back to the shop and told May. "Queer," I said, "we've not heard a word about it and who the devil F. Goble is licks me."

"I wonder Mr. Vosper or Mr. Batley hasn't said something to you," May rejoined.

"I don't suppose they knew. For that matter how is it your friends have said nothing? This F. Goble must be a relative of the ginger streak of misery next door and he was born, bred and wed here, a son of Storhaven and looks it. If we don't hear anything before I'll ask Vosper this evening. Bit of a lowdown trick on Goble's part."

"Well, I don't know, darling," May said; "he's no cause to love you, has he? and, after all, one has to expect competition."

"Competition? Damn it all! there're already three of us in Storhaven and there's certainly no room for a fourth, but if the Gobbler *thinks* there is, all right! Let him go ahead and we'll see who laughs last."

Vosper was able to satisfy my curiosity at once. "F. Goble," he said with a smile, "that must be his son Freddy by his first wife. He'd be about twenty-three or four; he's been living in Grimsby for the last year or two; running a newsagent and general shop; married with a brat or two, I believe, but I've not seen him knocking about here for some time; certainly not since you came; so he's opening a rival establishment, is he? Not going to lose any sleep over it, are you? You needn't; he's as slow as treacle."

"Lose sleep? My God, no! it's the dirty underhanded smack about it that riles me."

"I don't see that it's underhanded. You didn't know about it, but then you didn't expect Goble *père* to confide in you, did you? Not exactly matey, are you?"

"Not precisely! Well, I fancy we'll give master Freddy a run for his money."

"You'll have a pull with your library, anyhow. I can't see Freddy Goble doing you much harm there."

I laughed. "He probably won't be such a fool as to try."

But I underestimated the craft of the Gobles. Freddy, an almost exact replica of his father in appearance and looking nearly as old, opened a library at a weekly subscription of sixpence, and, aware of his limitations as a literary man, sought the assistance of schoolmaster Packe in the choice of books. Packe was, I am sure, a more than willing collaborator, and had he been less of a fool Goble's library might have proved a costly rival to ours. But he showed himself a perfect simpleton; he apparently assumed that to the generous sprinkling of more or less serious books in our collection our success was mainly due and, into the bargain, overlooked the fact that our fiction was first-rate stuff with only a small percentage of twaddle; we therefore catered for all tastes, our really good fiction being the main stand-by with the belles-lettres and the twaddle as hangers-on; but profitable hangers-on, inasmuch as the one brought into the shop the best class of the visitors on whom we could often plant our expensive chocolates and high-grade tobaccos and cigarettes, while the other brought the riff-raff who purchased cheap toys, picture-postcards and similar rubbish. As I say, Packe showed himself a perfect simpleton and Freddy's library was overloaded with classics, pseudo-classics and the dull and tedious stuff that Packe considered "literary." Freddy Goble's library was, in fact, a complete failure and the business on its other sides, while fairly successful, never gave us very much concern. Nevertheless, it was the opening of the business right at the beginning of our second year that seems to stand out in recollection not so much as a definite landmark but as a pointer; it was one of those queer happenings which, while not being in themselves a salient factor yet do seem extraordinarily significant, in much the same way that the wart on Cromwell's nose seems somehow significant to his whole career, if that isn't stretching fantasy to the point of absurdity.

Young Goble's business, as I have said, did not seem adversely to affect our own, and with the coming of the visitors

the annual brightening-up and general bustle began, and a tinkling stream of coin from fat pockets flowed into the tills of Storhaven's shops. Our weekly turnover began to climb into the thirties, to stay there a while and to show promise of reaching the forties; from the time we opened at eight till we closed at seven-thirty there were rarely fewer than half a dozen people in the shop, and our weekly receipts from the library alone were, in July, over five pounds. And yet, despite this apparent prosperity, there was the feeling that all was not well; it was hardly anything so definite as a feeling, but rather a formless and hazy sort of impression, an uneasy, elusive something hiding at the back of the mind. Perhaps it existed for me alone; I do not think May felt it; if she did she kept her own counsel. I might be led astray in recollection to ascribe this most indefinite but very unpleasant sensation to May's pregnancy, of which she was first aware in July, were it not so fixed in my memory that it synchronised with the opening of young Goble's shop in April. But certainly May's pregnancy accentuated the atmosphere of uneasiness of ill-boding, or whatever it was, for she was sick every day during the early months and intermittently for the rest of the time. It was the first time she had ever been really unwell in her life and it not only scared her but made her touchy, irritable and quarrelsome.

But I was, I frankly admit, little concerned with May's feelings; my own were sufficiently extraordinary to occupy most of my thoughts; and it is these feelings that I am going to find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to make clear; they are not altogether clear to me and it may be that they originated in, or were an offshoot of, that fantastic dream which had followed our first embrace; this seems the more probable because the dream had repeated itself and in similar circumstances, and when May told me of her pregnancy my mind went back to the night of the dream and I found no difficulty in convincing myself that it was then that she had conceived. And with this conviction there abruptly invaded

my mind again that grotesque fancy that the babe in May's womb was Barbara's. I want to make this as clear as anything so foolish can be clear; I did not, of course, believe it had any reality; I knew it for the grotesque fancy it was; my reason rejected it utterly and indeed mockingly; and yet I allowed it to stay in my mind; I played with it; more and more I allowed myself to think about it as if it were true, until it began to bear a semblance of reality, something after the way we allow ourselves, during a play, to accept the actor as the real person he is portraying; that is a poor analogy, but it is the nearest I can find.

But immediately May had told me and before I had remembered the repetition of my dream my feelings were, I imagine, strange and unusual—certainly I never had them again. I was neither glad nor sorry; I did not feel moved by any such superficial emotions; my indifference to children which two years at Telfer's had changed to active dislike seemed to have no connection at all with the matter; it was not a question of liking or disliking, of being pleased or annoyed; it went so much deeper than that; it was profound; it was a sensation unprecedented in the strength of its hold upon my mind; mystical is the only fitting word I know to describe it and I, a materialist abominating, challenging and denying the supernatural, am the last man in the world to use that word could I find an apter, or one as apt. This boy in May's womb (for I knew the babe was a boy, knew beyond any shadow of doubt; did not question it); this son of mine was, I felt, already alive as a human being and sharing in my life. From the very beginning I felt and knew this; I saw him in his mother's womb a perfectly formed boy, black-haired, olive-skinned, hazel-eyed, sitting regarding me, listening to me as I talked, as I talked to him with my thoughts. This was no fantasy due to ignorance. I had studied embryology, superficially it is true, but enough to know what the embryo was looking like at every stage in its development; but this knowledge did not affect my vision at all; it was merely the un-

important physical reality; the truth (and again I am compelled to use a word I hate), the mystical truth was that there sat my son Alister (already I had named him), chin on hands, elbows on knees, listening gravely and attentively as my thoughts talked to him; as I talked to him; I his father; my son, Alister; and again and again I allowed the fantasy to add its wild foolish whisper: Barbara's child.

Side by side with this odd mystical disturbance of my spirit (for thus I pictured it, my spirit as a deep still pool suddenly agitated violently from within its depths so that from bottom to surface all was in a strange new motion); side by side, then, with this went a mental disturbance almost equally elusive, which made me as edgy and irritable as May and only too ready to pick up the gage of verbal battle she seemed so often to throw down. In retrospect that first gestation of May's comes back to me as a period of stress and bickering and sickness; it was a hot, dry summer and May was often too tired at night to sleep; combining her domestic work with the running of the newspaper business and serving in the shop had been previously child's play to her capable energies but the added burden of a sick pregnancy was too much for her and at the end of August I was forced to employ a Mrs. Crow as a temporary housekeeper; she proved a shiftless incompetent with a passion for gin; her cooking was an abomination and her sluttish ways added one more prick to the many which were already fretting us. Our quarrels were, as I have said, frequent and each one with its accompaniment of bitter words opened breaches in the walls of our domestic comfort; happiness is a word I will not use in this connection, for there was never in our association the happiness of lovers living together; whether those quarrels and our harsh words opened breaches in the wall of May's love for me I shall never know; perhaps they did, for I gave my tongue and temper the rein and said many harsh things, so that it may well be that this period marked the beginning of our estrangement. It was during one of these bitter quarrels

that I accused her of deliberately seducing me into marriage. I reminded her of the picture I had seen when I opened the door of the parlour at 16 Angel Lane when I came back so late from my club; the picture of her curled up seductively in the big arm-chair in the firelight. "A pretty net for the flesh you spread in front of me," I jeered; "and you caught me; there was no risk to you, I'll wager; you were well prepared."

As I said this (it was at the beginning of one breakfast) she stared over at me blankly, almost stupidly, her face whitening, her lips trembling. "If you can think that," she said quietly, "if you can think that—" and stopped suddenly and pushed back her chair and went into the shop, leaving her meal untouched.

But that period was not all bickering and quarrelling; there were times when we seemed to draw closer to each other, when our voices were gentler, our looks kinder; times when we kissed and caressed and found comfort in this new need of each other. And for myself there were times when I was moved towards her with a warm, sudden surge of tenderness; a tenderness that was linked with anxiety and fear for her, and yet it was a tenderness, an anxiety, a fear not indeed for her own self but because of the boy she carried in her womb; it was a cherishing of the casket because of the jewel within.

And as my irritation drove me into quarrels with May so it drove me into outbursts of temper against Vosper and Batley; there was no quarrelling although I sought it, for they refused to take up the challenges I flung at them. This proof against all my provocation was easy to understand in the case of Batley; he was a difficult man to quarrel with; it was impossible to rouse him; he was too contented with life and too lazy to fight; he merely pulled hard at his pipe, drained his tankard and smiled amiably; and against that armour my heaviest guns were ineffective; he never argued and was prepared to agree to the wildest statement and to

contradict himself a dozen times in an evening; when I pointed out to him some startling contradiction, hoping to inveigle him into a row, he merely nodded and grinned and said, "As you like, soldier; have it either way; it's all the same to me." But Vosper's refusal to be drawn into a quarrel was a different matter. I often left him at the end of an evening, puzzled at the quiet way he had ignored my thrusts and at the skill by which he avoided treading on the coat-tails I trailed insultingly in front of him. It was not until a year or so later that I got any explanation of his magnanimity, for such it certainly was. "It was clear enough you were sick," he said, "and so I humoured you." That explanation bewildered me but I made no comment; I asked myself if it were true and often since I have repeated that question and the only reasonable answer I could find was that Vosper did not mean bodily sickness; he could not have meant that; I was then in my physical prime and did not know the meaning of sickness except as a quickly-passing morning seediness due to too much liquor the previous evening. What then did he mean? Spiritual sickness? Was that how he interpreted my tempers? Was that the way the disturbance of the deep pool of my spirit manifested itself to him? I don't know; as I said, I made no comment; perhaps he was waiting for one, hoping for one and ready if it came to explain himself; but I did not give him the chance and it is one of the few occasions in my life when I have regretted a silence; speech both hasty and considered I have regretted a thousand times.

This strange disturbance of my inner life which marked the whole term of Alister's gestation seemed to be emphasised by an odd concatenation of events which synchronised with his birth and gave to it more than ever the appearance of a crisis in my life; indeed I dare to say a crisis in life itself, tremendous presumption as that may sound; and the feeling implied in this presumption, that Alister, this son of mine, was a child apart, a dedicated being, a rare and unique personality, I never lost in all our life together;

always there was in my eyes something about him essentially of the spirit, something withdrawn, deep, serene, that made him kin to those men and women whose names mark an epoch, or have become symbolical; whose lives have revealed truths hitherto dark.

That these events were trivial in themselves is to me significant; evolution works by trivialities; it is trifles that disclose immensities; because of molehills the mountains stand revealed. What tremendous triviality, one might well ask, launched life upon this planet?

Alister was born in March and it was in March these trivial events took place. Long before this, as early indeed as the previous autumn, Batley and Vosper and I had often discussed ways of raising the wind. Our motives for this desire to grow rich were, I imagine, as contrasted as we were. Batley's was frankly selfish; he could never have too much money for the needs of his sensual Paradise. Vosper cared nothing for the financial side; he merely wanted something upon which to exercise his wits; perhaps it was merely to mitigate a passing boredom that he broached the matter, for it was certainly his idea. As for myself, I welcomed an opportunity to make money faster than the jog-trot way of our business; I was also by no means as satisfied with our prospects as May was, by the increase in our weekly turnover; finally I wanted money for Alister. Batley and I then wanted the comforting, solid cash; Vosper was content with the less material but to him more enjoyable side. Vosper, as I said, first introduced the matter; but he did more than that, as was his way, by suggesting a sound and watertight scheme; and it was again characteristic of him that the plan was intrinsically sound, but ten years ahead of the times as far as Storhaven was concerned. Had he lived two years longer than he did he would have seen his scheme in operation and making money hand over fist for the very rascals who scotched it for us.

What Storhaven badly needed, Vosper said, was beach-huts, forty or fifty of them, "and the man who's first in the

field," he had added, "will mint a pile." The long, breezy and occasionally violent discussions we had over the matter are of no interest; we did at last come to an agreement and on the first of January we took a ten years' lease from the council of convenient land adjoining the foreshore; for this we paid three hundred pounds and my hundred brought my balance at the bank unpleasantly low. Foolishly I did not tell May as I wanted to surprise her later with the accomplished fact of our good-fortune. Batley squeezed his hundred without much difficulty out of his complaisant little wife. "Bit of a job I had," he said, with his grin, "but only because she'd put all the spare cash aside for the renovating and decorating she's doing in the spring. But she shelled out in the end; meant an evenin' at home for me and a bit o' sprucing to say nothin' of things I've lost the taste for, but you can't get something for nothing in this world, old China, although you may think you're doing it now and again." Vosper, of course, had plenty of money. He was, in fact, to put up the whole of the money to build the first twenty huts and to receive fifty per cent. of the gross receipts for the first five years. It was Batley and I who insisted upon these terms; Vosper was quite willing to pay for the huts and share the proceeds equally with us. However, there were to be neither huts nor proceeds. We kept the whole affair secret, even after we signed the lease. Johnson, the clerk to the Council, and Carter, the surveyor, were both inquisitive, but Vosper smilingly fended off their hints; and when they advanced to open questions he began, rather foolishly, considering their powers, to jolly them; but his chaff, as always, had a waspish touch and these two luminaries of the town, both abdominally-betrayed men of middle age, had like the rest of the nabobs of Storhaven no relish for a bout in which their bludgeon-strokes merely beat the air. Batley said to him afterwards, "You shouldn't 'a stirred up them fellers, David; 'specially Carter; he's the cove that can do us a thick-'un when the time comes."

"If he does," grinned Vosper, "I'll blackmail the be-

paunched hog. Before Father died he told me all the dark secrets of Storhaven and they're worse than those of Sodom and Gomorrah. I'm going to show you two innocents my album one of these days; it's beguiled my bloodiest hours."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a book of drawings of Storhaven's notabilities, male and female, and shows 'em each caught *flagrante delicto* in his or her pet vice; and all stark; a great book; Beardsley never did anything half as great or as funny; I'm leaving it to the British Museum in my will."

"What's *flagrante delicto*, soldier?" chuckled Batley.

"Finger in the jam-pot. Talking of pots, how about a can of beer?"

Whatever the motives of the Council might have been when, about the middle of March, we submitted plans for twenty beach-huts, they refused to sanction them on hygienic grounds. Vosper, in a warm interview with Carter, pointed out that beach-huts were already a popular amenity at dozens of English resorts and at hundreds of continental ones and that, provided certain rules were obeyed, no one's health or aesthetic sensibilities need be in danger; and, he added pointedly, the buildings he proposed to erect having been planned by a man who was a craftsman and an artist (he was in fact Gordon Douglas, a friend of Vosper's and later famous as an architect of some of the fine post-war structures in the West End of London) would put Storhaven on the map as a spot worth visiting.

"I'd an idea," Carter replied blandly, his eyes narrowing, his lips pursing puffily, "that Storhaven already had beauties considered worth inspection by—er—people who—who-know."

"Academy clap-trap!" jeered Vosper; "Storhaven's as ugly as sin, as *sin!*" with mocking emphasis.

"Ah, well, I've no doubt you know, Mr. Vosper; I'll put what you've said before the Council. It will receive the Council's full consideration."

"Thanks." Vosper paused a moment and then, leaning forward in his chair, he said bluntly, "Look here, Mr. Carter, in this sort of business what you say goes. Can I count on your support?"

Carter smiled faintly. "You flatter my powers, I'm afraid. I merely advise and the Council decides and not always according to my advice."

"Oh, well," airily, "I'll take that small risk if you'll advise 'em to pass the plans."

"I'll see what can be done," his voice as bland as sucking-pig fat, as David put it afterwards. And with that we had to be content for the time being.

The Council at a second meeting merely repeated its refusal and in the letter Vosper received from Johnson it was stated that the Council's decision had been a unanimous one and the matter could not be opened again.

And so we were left with some thousands of square feet of wilderness on our hands and local witticism for many months enjoyed itself by asking David with bovine expressions of immense gravity, "When 're you startin' them hotels o' yours, Mr. Vosper?" Some of the purveyors of witticism often paid heavily for their joke, for David knew all the pimples on Storhaven's body corporate and had a shrewd diagnosing eye for its internal ulcers. Tanner, the chemist, for example, received the devastating retort: "After your wife's next abortion, Mr. Tanner."

David wanted to buy-in Batley's and my shares at the price we paid but we refused to take advantage of his characteristic generosity. After his death the lease which had then two years to run was sold by Batley and me in *The Lord Nelson* for a bottle of whisky.

The other two trivial events of that March were my abandonment of the Sunday evening church-going and my row with Goble the fruiterer.

I had long been sick of this weekly humbug of attendance at St. Mary's Church and I had frequently pointed out to

May that our business would fare none the worse if we ceased to go and that if we lost a few customers we'd probably gain others and in any case could afford the small loss. The first time I had brought the matter up May had retorted warmly. "But I like going; I don't consider it humbug; I look forward to Sunday evening for many reasons, not all of them religious ones; I have many friends who go and I like to meet them; I don't get many other opportunities." I said no more then but the next time I referred to it she merely said, "Well, I shall go, Richard," and thereafter she refused to discuss it. Although I was justified in taking this to mean I could please myself I was well aware, after two years of married life, that it would not prove as simple as that and so I continued to attend, while waiting for an excuse to make the break. The Vicar, the Rev. James Hannah, I considered a smug and pompous hypocrite and I have no doubt that he disliked me as heartily as I did him. The knife was then already sharpened which should sever my ecclesiastical bonds; how to wield it without incurring the onus for the slash was all that remained to be done; it would need to be a crafty stroke and I solicited Vosper's help.

"Put the holy old sheep in the wrong," he said.

"Yes, I know; but how?"

"Join the choir and sing outa tune," suggested Batley.

"Who'd notice it?" I asked. "How d'you manage to dodge church, Batley?"

"Don't dodge it, old man. Go twice a year. Chris'mas to give the missis a treat and Good Friday because it's worse outside 'n in. Wife goes reg'lar twice every Sunday but she don't expect me to go. I told her soon after we was married that at that ceremony (married at St. Mary's we were, St. Mary's, Clapham Common) 'at that ceremony, old sweetheart,' I said, 'I gotta prize peach' (meaning her) 'and if I went to church every blinkin' day for a thousand years I'd not find a better one, so why go?' And that was that. Killed

two birds with one stone. Pleased as punch she was; nothing like a bit of honey. Why not try it on Mrs. C, eh?"

"Thanks," I said sarcastically; "we happened to be married at the registrar's."

"Well, that makes it a bit awkward, o' course, but I reckon the—the—what-you-call-it's the same."

"Shut up, you fat humbug," David laughed; "your heavy-fisted methods won't do here! guile is called for. Damned if I can think of anything, Carden. Why not just don't go?"

"You get married, old soldier," chuckled Batley, pointing his pipe-stem at David, "and you'll see why not. That sort o' thing won't do. You gotta be leary with women."

But in the event guile was not required. May, who was nearing her time, her "need" as they called it locally, said to me one evening at tea-time, "It'll be nice to have the baby christened in such a fine old church as St. Mary's."

"What!" I snapped, "christened? I don't want any of that mumbo-jumbo for Alister. I'd as soon think of having him vaccinated."

"But, Richard," she said, in almost a tone of dismay, "it's not fair to the baby not to have it christened if its parents are members of the Church of England. Besides, what are we going to say to Mr. Hannah? He'll——"

"Damn Hannah! And as for being a member of the Church of England *I'm* not, for one."

"Well, you go, Richard, anyhow."

I saw my chance and took it. "That's easily remedied," I rejoined; "I'll go no more."

She looked at me for a long long moment in silence; there was I thought in her glance something I had never seen before, contempt; or perhaps I was mistaken. Anyhow, her silence irritated me and I said angrily, "So that's fixed and I don't want to hear any more about it."

"And you never will from me," she replied quietly. I thought she was about to cry and of late I had had more than enough of tears and so I got up from the table and filling my

pipe went into the shop. This easy lapsing into tearfulness was, I knew, due to her condition and was best ignored as far as possible.

My row with the wretched Goble was, I admit, my own fault, inasmuch as by the very act of entering his shop I invited a snub; but that initial error granted the responsibility for the ensuing regrettable fracas (as *The East Anglian Gazette* described it) was Goble's. May suddenly, one evening shortly after seven, expressed a desire for grapes. "I'll hop along and get you some," I said, intending to go to Benstead's, the other fruiterer, at the far end of the High Street. But I was busy; I was, as a matter of fact, trying to work out a likely double for the Lincolnshire Handicap and the Grand National and in the fascination of juggling with horses, jockeys, stables and past performances I forgot all about the grapes, only remembering them on the stroke of half-past seven, at which time both Benstead and Goble closed and, out of the season, closed sharp on the minute. It was too late to get to Benstead's, although I could certainly have knocked at his back door and got what I wanted; but I should have felt under an obligation to him and he was a psalm-singing mite of a man who, I knew, regarded me with disapproval, although outwardly friendly. I therefore decided to go into Goble's and buy the grapes. The shop was empty except for Goble himself, who was about to put up the shutters. He had one raised in his arms as I entered and he put it down slowly, straightened his back and stared at me offensively.

"Well," he asked, "what can I do for you, Mr. Carden?"

"I'd like a pound of grapes," I replied, pointing to a large bunch on a hook; "perhaps I'd better take the whole bunch."

"Ah, sorry," he said acidly, "that's sold and it's the only one left. There's lemons you can have," looking at me sideways and then stooping again to the shutter. With his long scrawny neck, high bald forehead and beaky nose he looked like a sick vulture. I felt there was a grin under his drooping

moustache as he turned his back to me and he was nearer being kicked adequately than he realised.

"I don't happen to want lemons," I rejoined, "but grapes, or rather Mrs. Carden does. Can't you let me have half of them?"

"Sorry; not mine now they're sold, you see; wouldn't do at all."

I knew that he was lying; but that wasn't much help. I wanted those grapes, and now, furious at the position I had let myself into and at Goble's insolent mocking manner, I intended to have them.

"Who're they for?" I asked bluntly. "I dare say I could—"

"That's my business, Mr. Carden; that's *my* business and if you don't want any lemons I'll ask you to go as I'm in a hurry and it's ten minutes past closing time already."

"Just going," I replied, "but as the buyer of your grapes hasn't come for them I'll take them; send in the bill in the morning," and lifting the bunch off the hook I made for the door.

With a leap of surprising agility Goble barred my way. "Put them grapes down, Mr. Carden!" he said, his moustache trembling, his face a sickly white, "put 'em down!"

"I've bought them," I said, grinning into his agitated face, "and I'll pay for them when you send the bill. Now get to hell out of my way!" and without more ado I shouldered him out of my path. He drew back a pace and then, emitting an indescribable noise, he struck at me with one of his bony fists. I ducked too late to avoid it and it landed flush on my eye, the flesh of which puffed up instantly and completely blinded me on that side. I dropped the grapes and hit him with all my strength full on the mouth, cutting my knuckles to the bone on his yellow teeth, three of which were knocked out. He went down and made no attempt to get up but lay on the floor amongst his baskets of vegetables spitting and groaning. I looked down at him, my fury unappeased.

"Have a grape, Goble," I said, and pulling off some I crushed them into his mouth and then calmly taking a paper bag from a bundle I put the rest of the grapes inside and bade him good-night.

At half-past nine that evening, just as I was about to run along to *The Nelson*, Freddy Goble arrived and from the street invited me loudly to come out and be bashed. I was about to accept the invitation when Police Constable Hooper sauntered up and persuaded Freddy to go home and leave the law to right any wrongs.

The Storhaven magistrates were the Mayor, Watchmaker and Jeweller Edward Rice; Foss, the retired draper; and Courtenay Brockway an old county fellow, dim-sighted, deaf and egregiously proud of his reputation for being lenient to the poor; he was eighty; he had the mental age of a child of six and his spiritual home was the Age of Chivalry and Infamy.

The Bench, in the Mayor's words, took a "grave view" of the Goble affair and fined me as the wanton aggressor (again the Mayor's phrase) two pounds with five shillings costs, plus the amount of Goble's medical and dental expenses, when these should be known. I asked Rice, in as provoking a tone as I could safely adopt, what exactly he meant by wanton and thereby succeeded in stirring him up to the remark that he was sorry to see I showed no remorse for conduct which was a discredit to the town and deplorable in a man of education.

I paid the fine without any comment upon his impertinence but I intended to bide my time in the hope of settling accounts with Master Rice. It was a hope which never came to complete fulfilment, for despite my rudeness to him in public and private he refused to be provoked into a quarrel. My rudeness was quite literally calculated, for Vosper and I worked out all sorts of small crafty affronts to his Worship which, while pricking his pomposity most infuriatingly, gave him no chance of hitting back through his office as Mayor

and magistrate; if he wanted to hit (and he must have done most damably), he'd have to do it as a man with his own strength and not the law's; and he wasn't man enough for a job like that and knew it.

It would be nonsense for me to pretend that these events had no effect upon my spirits; they had, and a very decided one; they convinced me that Storhaven was never likely to bring me much either of success or happiness; I already disliked and despised it as I despised and disliked the great majority of its townsfolk; I could see no other prospect before me there but a continuance of my present discontents and a more than probable increase of them until existence became unbearable. The mood of depression engendered by these conclusions was at its deepest and greyest when on the night of March 30th (a night of drizzle and fog) Alister was born.

May and I had decided that the services of a doctor were unnecessary. May's decision was due, I think, more than anything else to a fear that a doctor might give her chloroform against her wish and she had a strange horror of anaesthetics; my cordial agreement with her objection to calling in a doctor had a more reasonable basis; my father's life-long dyspepsia and sudden death and my mother's cancer had in my youth given me a very poor opinion of the knowledge and skill of general practitioners; my years in Angel Lane had confirmed that opinion and my Uncle Fred's tales of faulty diagnosis, wrong treatment and botched operations had hammered the opinion into a conviction; there were not wanting also in those Angel Lane days dozens of women clients with harrowing stories of hospital maltreatment; altogether then I would rather, as I said to May, call in a parson than a medical man; he would at least not paralyse the healing efforts of the body with drugs.

In any case, there was in Storhaven only a choice between two doctors, Charles Mitchison, L.R.C.P., an oily obese old man of strongly semitic appearance; and James Haldane, a lean, saturnine Scot, with a Trinity College, Dublin, diploma.

As far as I was concerned he would have been ruled out in any case, for he was a heavy whisky drinker and his hands were usually as foully unclean as any early Victorian house-surgeon's.

Either Mitchison or nobody! And nobody promised the best chance to both mother and babe! With this view Mrs. Heaps, the midwife, entirely concurred and on the evening of March 29th, when she looked in to see May, I had a few minutes chat with her alone.

"Certainly she'll not want a doctor, Mr. Carden. She'll be safe with me. I've brought over seven hundred bairnies into the world and the only ones lost were those where a doctor was meddling. Between you and me and the gate-post, y'know. Yes, I will have just a drain; half a glass; why, there now, you've filled it! but a lot of it's head so perhaps I'll manage it. Doctors!" raising one hand to pat the weird erection of starched linen perched on her grey hair, "I could tell you some tales that would make you sick; but I won't upset you at this time. The tales I could tell! little angels ripped to pieces just because the doctor couldn't wait for nature; I'm not saying hereabouts, you understand; not at all; fine young mothers cut up and maimed for life, as you might say; never the same again; just poor crippled things like birds with broken wings; this is very nice stout; it's a pity Mrs. Carden won't touch it; she ought to if she's going to feed the babe; she must make blood and there's nothing like stout for blood, good rich blood; but there! there's nobody so obstinate as a woman expecting; and the young women these days won't even listen to advice let alone take it; well, just a drain; no more; thank you; I must be trotting; now don't you go worrying or let your good lady worry; she'll be safe with me and I don't expect a bad labour at all; and first labours *are* bad at times, I can assure you; but I know you don't want to hear about such things just now; not that you need let *them* worry you; Mrs. Carden's a fine healthy young woman; just *made* for bearing children; not like some

poor young things with bodies like boys who never ought to marry at all; not that they don't pay for it; I remember a poor little thing no bigger'n a child herself; a five day's labour and then rushed off to hospital and put on the table and then after they'd used the knife something terrible to die after all and the babe too and the young husband out of his mind with it all. Ah, well, men have all the pleasure, Mr. Carden, and women all the pain; but you needn't worry about your good lady; she'll be as safe as a lamb in the fold; I really must be running along. Don't forget to let me know at once if anything unexpected happens; but we needn't look for anything like that, I'm sure."

Nothing unexpected did happen and shortly after half-past eleven on the night of March 30th, Mrs. Heaps came down-stairs and put my son Alister into my arms. I looked down at the flushed face of the mite; its small long head was covered with intensely black sleek hair which afterwards came off. "A fine boy, Mr. Carden; nine pounds and I've never seen a lovelier child. You may go up and see Mrs. Carden in ten minutes. She's fine and will do well now. Would you like to hold your son while I make Mrs. Carden something hot?" She went off into the kitchen leaving me with Alister in my arms. And suddenly all those strange mystical feelings I had experienced during the nine months seemed to rush together, to coalesce, to crystallise as it were into one bright diamond of acute sensation; and I had the oddest hallucination of an inner voice crying loudly in my ears; *This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.* I felt a surge of emotion go over me; felt so moved that for a moment my self-control seemed about to slip away from me; and to pull myself together I held the sweet mite high above my head and looking up at him I laughed aloud out of the fullness of my heart in a way I had not done for years. Scream? Of course he didn't; he was Alister, my son; he stared down at me with wide, calm, blue eyes that later became hazel; it was as if he were remembering all the talks

we had had when he was yet in the darkness of the womb.

When Mrs. Heaps came in again and took him I followed her upstairs and went in to see May. She smiled up at me a trifle wanly as I bent over her to kiss her; there was a yellowish pallor about her face, an odd almost stupid stare in her eyes and a thickness in her breathing which, with the unpleasant halitus of blood and the disorder of the room, made up a scene from which I was glad to escape quickly with no other emotion than one of faint disgust.

During the next three years two other children were born, Teresa, fourteen months after Alister and Paul, eighteen months later. Neither during their gestation nor at their birth did I experience any of those strangely disturbing feelings that so beset me with Alister; indeed my chief, if not my only, emotion upon their arrival was one of annoyance; I looked upon them as intruders and expensive ones. May was glad to have a daughter but neither of us wanted Paul. Alister and I indeed wanted no one else at all; we were sufficient for each other.

CHAPTER IX

FAMILY

TESSA's birth satisfying May's desire for a daughter we had no intention of increasing our responsibilities by further additions to the family and Paul's conception, due to carelessness, was regarded by us both as something of a calamity. It was not so much that May dreaded the long sickness of gestation and the final ordeal (she was not, as it happened, sick at all with Paul and the actual birth was over in an hour) but we simply could not afford either the immediate expense or the remoter but very real cost of rearing and educating another child. The business had never fulfilled the promise of its first year and while it kept us in moderate comfort we were unable to save anything considerable; but worse than the present smallness of the profits was the lack of any sign that things would improve. We seemed, May and I, by now to have reached a sort of steady balance represented in terms of money by five pounds a week and in terms of our life together by a more or less friendly association in which violent quarrels equally with passionate love-making were not allowed to intrude. And I am forced to admit that what few signs there were of any change both in the business and in our life together all pointed downhill.

Faced then by the threat of an unwanted newcomer in the family circle, already to my mind too large by one, May with characteristic thoroughness set herself to prevent that coming; equally characteristic was her blunt refusal to go beyond what could be designated, without undue sophistry, natural means of bringing about the desired result. Nature, however, perhaps affronted at what she may have considered

false representation, declined to assist and May, in desperation, was driven to relax her moral code to the extent of asking me to sound Tanner, the Storhaven chemist, whose gifts in the required direction were—at least locally—notorious. But sounding Tanner proved as difficult as sounding the Pacific Ocean; my friendship with Vosper was scarcely a credential to his favour but I think it is probable he had received a hint from quarters likely to prove dangerous that his activities had better be limited to those permitted by the law and he had in consequence become alarmed. Whatever the reason, I got nothing out of Tanner and his bland if childish pretence of not understanding what I was driving at goaded me into saying offensively, "Abortion I was referring to, Mr. Tanner, abortion; I thought you specialised in it." His face whitened and he leaned forward in his chair (we were in his parlour) and said furiously, "Will you repeat that before witnesses, Mr. Carden, eh? Will you?"

"Not just now, thanks," I said, grinning at him savagely, "I've enough trouble on my hands already." And with that I left him.

When I told May she shrugged her shoulders and said "Oh, well, I'll have to go through with it then; there's nothing else to be done."

"There is," I rejoined.

"What?"

"Why, what we should have done at first. But we needn't lose any more time. Go to your father and ask him to help you."

"Ask father?" May said in a voice which was quiet, but which did not seem otherwise disturbing. I was scraping my pipe out into the fender and so was not watching her.

"Of course," I went on; "what fools we were not to have gone to him at first. It would have been child's play then; still, even now I'm sure he'll be able to bring it off. He's helped, as he calls it, scores of women in his time and it'll be odd if he can't—"

"Stop! how dare you!" May shouted; and turning from my scraping I regarded her crimson face and wild expression in utter astonishment. For the life of me I could not grasp what was the matter. "Stop what, May?" I asked, "what in the devil's name are you shouting about?"

"What about? What about?" she went on hysterically, "You dare to—to—to—suggest I should go to my own father and ask him to—to—oh! You must be a beast to think—" and breaking off abruptly she turned away from me and put one hand up to her face.

The humbug of such an outburst infuriated me. I turned quickly and grasping her arm pivoted her roughly round to face me. "How dare I?" I said, "why, damnation, what's bitten you?"

She did not answer nor attempt to loosen my grasp or to turn away from me but sat looking into my face with no expression at all on her own. "By God!" I went on, "what cant! What filthy cant!"

"Yes, filthy," she replied in a stupid flat voice; and then she leant forward and with her free hand struck me twice in the face and fell forward in a faint, which lasted so long that I had to go for Mrs. Casson, a woman friend of hers a few doors away, and in the subsequent confusion and fussing the cause of it all was forgotten or anyhow shelved. Neither of us broached the main topic again and as far as I know nothing more was done and in due course Paul was born on November the seventh, a mild muggy day; few babes can have entered the world more unwelcome.

The contrast between my dislike of the new infant (for to that I fear it amounted) my indifference towards Tessa and my complete absorption in Alister, now a slim dark handsome little chap of nearly three, gave me about this time much material for reflection; Tessa was a fair, plump, curly-headed little thing and Paul was even fairer, with every promise of being a sturdy mite; they were then two quite healthy, pretty and engaging youngsters and yet I regarded

them not only without any affection but much in the same way as I had regarded the boys at Telfer's, as abominable little nuisances, as small animals with whom no adult could possibly have any points of contact and who were only sufferable at a distance. It was clear to me that, as I had always suspected, all talk of the pride of fatherhood and instinctive paternal love was but one of the many clap-traps with which humanity, as Vosper said, disguised from itself the harsh realities of human existence.

But as regards Alister everything was different, on a different plane. I loved him and was proud of him; not for his beauty, his charm and his attractive ways, but for that something which went far deeper and had had its birth at the moment of his conception; or so I believed; so I still believe; if I deluded myself, if I still delude myself, then it is a delusion so much without price that rather than lose it I would be glad to die. Alister, my son, was as much a part of me as my own body and my own thoughts, as close, as near to me as myself, dearer than my own life. To say I loved him is to ask of a word more meaning than it holds; to say I idolised him is to lift up a silly word to a height it cannot sustain. I cannot, I am afraid, make it clear, this feeling I bore him; bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh—how pale a shadow that is of the reality; he was so much more than that; he was spirit of my spirit; all that was of any worth in me.

And what was I to him? As much? Half as much? How can I judge or say? So much was hidden then even from my probing spiritual hunger; so much is still and must remain hidden. But in a hundred little ways he fed my love and inspired my hope. Even in his first year he showed his preference for me before all others, before even his mother, and by the time Paul was born we were as much inseparable companions as circumstance permitted. It was to me he came for nursery rhymes and stories; to me he ran with his hurts and his small griefs (greater to me than to him); it was I who taught him to speak and between us there was no baby jar-

gon; when he cried out in the night it was my name he called, and when he was restless or in pain it was I only who could soothe him off to sleep. But it went deeper than that; he thought my thoughts and knew my dreams for him. Folly? Fond delusion? Nothing of the sort; I had a thousand proofs of this dovetailing of our inmost selves; again and again he has suddenly asked me a question about something I was thinking. Common enough? Is it? Now and then, at infrequent intervals between two people who live together; I admit that; it is common; but is it not because their lives together make their mental processes flow along similar channels and give rise to the coincidence known as telepathy? But with Alister and me it was more than that, far more, utterly different, different in kind. This commonplace of telepathy is never more than a coinciding of thought about some matter of which both persons have some knowledge; but Alister would appear to divine thoughts passing through my mind concerning things he could not know, beyond his grasp; I would call it a sort of mediumship if I did not despise and hate that word and all the wily charlatans and credulous fools who use it. Proof? You demand that? Is it a fair demand? Do you demand it of your gods, of your priests? You must have faith; believe without proof; you must believe me. And yet it is a just demand and I will satisfy it; not with the hundred proofs I could give but one; if you are not satisfied let me remind you of the agnostic who said "If but one single drop of rain went upwards it would shatter the whole fabric of science and make miracle a fact!" It was a month or so after Alister's second birthday, a warm evening in May; he had called out and I had gone up to his bed and given him the drink he had asked for; after tucking the clothes about him I sat down on his bed and he took my hand and held it tightly, as he often did, before dropping off to sleep. I watched his eyes close and then looked out of the open window at the stars and there came abruptly into my mind those heartrending words I had read out to Vosper and

Batley: *Philip, his father, laid here the twelve-years-old child, his high hope, Nicoteles*, and Alister opened his eyes, blinked at the night-light and then, looking at me a little puzzled, said, "Why am I your high hope, Father?" and so fast upon the heels of my thought came his question that for a moment all it implied was hidden and I answered without surprise, "because you are Alister, my son," and at that he smiled and closed his eyes again, and abruptly I realised what had happened. A lie? A silly invention? I admit it looks so; I can only swear it is the truth, swear now as I would then have sworn it; there is no reason now why I should lie, even to myself. Perhaps your own children have been slow in speaking, long in using words aptly, in fitting them into sentences; have been three or four or five before they could handle them in such a fashion as to voice their thoughts; that must be a common experience; Paul was like that; but not Alister; bear in mind, while justifiably rejecting my fantasy that my thoughts talked to him dark in the womb, that from the day of his birth we were companions and that I took him about with me and talked my thoughts aloud to him long before he could say a word; and I always spoke my thoughts as they came to me, never trying to simplify them or to use simple words; and so by the time he was two he knew a thousand words at least, even if he could not use all of them aptly, and he could construct and use long sentences; he could, in fact, within the limits imposed by his vocabulary and his experience of life converse like an adult. You will accept that but not the rest? It is a pity but it cannot be helped; it is the truth and I can only repeat that and leave it.

The last thing in the world I wish to do is to give the impression that Alister was an abnormal child, different from other children in habits, ways and emotions; any abnormality was my own in my intense preoccupation with him; the only thing unusual about Alister was the warmth and depth of the bond between him and me; apart from that he was,

although mentally precocious, like other children of his age; but it was just that bond which for me put him in a unique position; all other children, including Tessa and Paul, bored me, irritated me, annoyed me; he fascinated me something after the fashion that a fine craftsman is fascinated by his craft; to watch his mind and his body grapple with and overcome difficulties became more and more the chief interest in my life.

I watched his body grow in beauty and I watched his mind open and flower. I have often deeply regretted that I did not note down daily the visible manifestations, if not of that bodily growth (for in that he would differ little from all other children), then of his mental flowering, which was, naturally, in many ways peculiar to himself. I left it all to my memory and strong and oddly phonographic as that is, in this instance it fails me; I can, ironically enough, remember word for word dozens of trumpery and trivial talks in which I took part as child, youth and man; but I can write down but little of all my early talks with Alister from the days when, having no speech of his own, he sat and listened with his big hazel eyes searching my face, to the time when at six or seven he could discuss with me intelligently and at length almost any subject under the sun. I am therefore with one or two exceptions reduced to generalities; to the mere recollection of the fascinated delight with which I watched and listened; to a remembered impression of enchantment and wonder and pride, instead of the vividness of the actual words.

I never lied to him; in all our life together I have never lied to him. No psychologist taught me that; my son taught me that piece of wisdom himself, the first of many things he taught me; I quickly realised when first he began to ask me questions that they were clearly the result of cogitation; that he had thought about them himself, had either come to some conclusion or failed to find a satisfactory one and sought corroboration or assistance; those questions therefore demanded an answer and the honestest one I could give. I am not re-

ferring to those hundreds of trivial queries such as "why are you screwing up your face, Father?" with which children will maddeningly bombard fond adults, but questions about birth and death and sickness; about God and the natural phenomena of life. By the time he was four (that at the very latest; three would I believe be nearer the truth) Alister had asked me about birth and death; about the difference between himself and Tessa, between May and me; who God was and Christ; what the sea was, the clouds, the sky, the moon, sun, stars and the rain; what time was; the names and uses and functions of physical parts of the body and what was within; and dozens of other questions with which all parents are familiar. And, as I say, I told him the truth; I told him, that is, what I held to be the truth, adding that other people thought differently and that he must wait and think it out for himself.

Let me telescope a score, a hundred, of our talks into one. I am forced to do this because, as I have explained, my material is so regrettably scanty; it is made scantier still because I omit some of his most intimate questions and my replies; I imagine he asked me these intimate questions so freely and without embarrassment because he had always been used to nakedness in himself, in his brother and sister and in his parents; the children, for example, always slept naked (after the napkin stage was passed) as I have myself done from the time my mother ceased to regulate and control my personal habits.

"What's the matter with this bird, Father?"

"It's dead."

"What's dead?"

"Without life; it can't eat or drink or sleep or fly or move any more."

"Will it be always like that?"

"No; presently it will rot, fall to pieces, go right away into little bits of feathers and bone; into dust, gone altogether."

"Where will it be gone?"

"It won't be gone anywhere; there's nothing left of it to go. It's something like this," and I struck a match and blew out the flame; "you see, the flame's gone, disappeared, vanished."

"Will you die?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Oh, I don't know," with a laugh; "not for a long, long time, I hope."

"Will I die?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Oh, not for a long, long, long while."

"A year?"

"Oh, a hundred years. Perhaps you'll live as long as old Tom Spence. But, you see, nobody knows how long they're going to live."

"I wouldn't like to be like Tom Spence. Does it hurt when you die?"

"Sometimes."

"Where do you go when you die?"

"You disappear, vanish, go away to nothing, like the bird, like the flame."

"Aren't you anywhere?"

"No. I don't think so. Some people think you are; they think you leave your body here on the earth and go somewhere yourself. But that's too hard. It's too hard for me, too. You must wait till you're a bit older and think about it for yourself."

"Who's God?"

"Who's been telling you about God?"

"Mrs. Heaps said God saw me take the sugar."

(Damn Mrs. Heaps, the drunken old reprobate!)

"I don't know who God is and no one else does either, so I shouldn't worry your head about Him."

"Does he know I took the sugar?"

"No," I laughed. "It's just a tale."

"Why is Mr. Goble a bloody fool?"

"Who said he was?"

"You did. You said so to Mother."

"Well, I think he is a fool."

"A bloody fool?"

"Yes, if you like. But I shouldn't say bloody fool if I were you."

"Why?"

"Well, lots of people don't like hearing words like bloody and when you go to school they'll punish you if you say them."

"Do you like them?"

"I don't mind. I don't care tuppence either way. You can say what you like to me; but other people are different."

"Will Tessa die and Paul and Mother?"

"Yes, of course; everybody dies some time or other."

"Is everybody born?"

"Of course. How could they get here if they weren't born?"

"Where were they before they were born?"

"Inside their mothers."

"Like baby is?" (This was during Paul's gestation and Alister had felt and watched his vigorous movements.)

"Yes. Everyone lives at first in a mother's body and when they've grown strong enough to live outside they're born, like the chicks you saw coming out of their shells at Mr. Palmer's."

"How do they get inside mother's body?"

"They just grow; like an apple grows on a tree; but it's a bit hard to understand; you'll have to wait till you're a bit older. But nobody understands all about it."

"Don't you?"

"Good Lord, no."

"Doesn't Mother?"

"No. Nobody does."

"Where were they before they were inside their mothers?"

"I don't know. I don't think they were anywhere."

"They must have been somewhere."

"I mean they hadn't begun to be alive; they hadn't begun to grow; they hadn't begun at all; you see everyone has to begin, or be born, just as they have to end, or die."

"And are they nothing before they begin?"

"You're asking me more than I know. It's one of the things we all puzzle about. I think we were nothing before we were born and are nothing after we die. But some people think differently."

"Are you Mother's Father?"

"No; her husband."

"What's a husband?" And so on and so on, through the whole range of human relationship. Many of Alister's questions often surprised me, startled is the truer word; it used to seem incredible that a child so young could be puzzling about matters usually reckoned to be no concern of children and of no interest to them; but I soon learned that there are few topics without some interest to a young child and about which he has not thought. I was often also surprised, but immensely pleased, at the logical way Alister followed up an answer of mine with another and very searching question. How we underestimate children's reasoning powers and how we delude ourselves into believing that they have no interest in or knowledge of the sexual side of life! Alister doubtless learned a good deal from me, but I learned far more from him. I learned, for example, that the chief difference mentally between a young child and an adult is that the child lacks the vocabulary to clothe its thoughts in words; its thoughts are much the same as our own; it is only the vehicle which is missing.

Most of my daytime leisure I spent with Alister, and when there was not much of that commodity I made it; I never allowed the shop business to encroach upon the time I

allotted to him and was, indeed, only too ready to put work aside at his call. We spent long hours on the beach and often went fishing ("tipple-towing," it was called in Storhaven) in a fifteen-foot dinghy I had bought second-hand for a fiver from Tom Herrington, one of the fishermen. During May's pregnancy with Paul, in order that she should get out more, I bought a horse and trap at a sale of the effects of a bankrupt farmer. I paid twelve pounds for both, and although the horse was a fat jog-trot obstinate beast with a vast appetite, and the trap a clumsy, much-mended and rattling affair, that purchase and the dinghy's were, in terms of pleasure, the two great bargains of my life; that they were also to play a part, one in a minor disaster and the other in a tragedy, does not nullify that estimate. The horse and trap were knocked down to me so cheaply because just then the more venturesome of the Storhaven tradesmen were investing in small motor-vans. It still gives me immense satisfaction to think that I made that fat, lazy beast pay for his keep and make a profit; I began a library service for all the neighbouring villages, and the paper boy (he was now a youth of seventeen), after his morning round with papers, set off for a three or four hours' round with books; it was at first a jest in Storhaven, but it quickly began to pay (especially during the season) and soon to the books were added stationery, toys and sweets for which I had to obtain a pedlar's licence; I intended to add tobacco and cigarettes but found myself unaccountably opposed in this by my wholesaler, with whom I could not afford to quarrel. Not infrequently I would do this round myself and take Alister beside me on the driving-seat, and those are some of the happiest memories of those days; mornings in early summer with the countryside fresh and green and lovely, the old horse jogging lazily along, the trap rumbling and creaking and swaying, my pipe smoking sweetly and beside me Alister, his legs stretched out straight, his body pressed close to mine, his big hazel eyes wide with interest. Sometimes we would both sit in silence; or I would

talk and he would listen, contenting himself with a little nod or a smile; and at others he would keep up a stream of questions. I was happy then, and I knew it, and he, too, was happy. We would both often laugh from sheer exuberance of spirits and occasionally I would sing songs or chant rhymes as we went along, flicking the old horse lightly on the rump in time with the measure. We called that tickling him up, and as soon as I began to sing Alister would begin to laugh and to cry out in uncontrollable delight, "Tickle up Joey, Father, tickle him up!" I have those memories; if there were a God to thank I would thank Him for that; there were to be other and greater things for me to store away in my memory; but none happier; none more dear to me now, Alister, my son, my son.

He was slim and dark and tall for his age with fine silky black hair and big hazel eyes. He was a beautiful little chap; not merely in my eyes, but in anyone's; visitors would stare after him in the street and several painters, friends of Vosper's, wanted to paint him naked. I don't wonder at that, for the beauty of his slim naked body used to stir me with a strange pain I had never before experienced. But I would not let them. Somehow it seemed a desecration. It is odd I should have thought that, for I have no feelings about nakedness at all in a general way; if all the world went naked I doubt if I should turn to look, except, perhaps, at some rare loveliness or, in laughter, at some grotesque obesity. I would not at first even allow Vosper to draw him; and then Alister asked me. He was fond of Vosper and called him David (as he often called me Richard). "Let David draw me, Father, just once." The once became many times. It is queer I have never possessed one of those drawings Vosper made; he never offered me one (I never knew him give away a drawing, although I've seen him destroy dozens), and I never cared to ask. Vosper was a man surrounded by many barricades; he let me over most of them, more, I imagine, than anyone else, but not the last few; he was a mite of a fellow; I could have

picked him up and killed him with my hands, but he was the only man I have met whose last barricades, when he withdrew behind them, I did not dare to approach. And so, as he did not proffer a drawing of Alister, I never asked for one; but I do not need it; I can see him now as he was then in every vivid line of his grace and beauty.

I am, I suppose, no more observant than the average man, and May was, if anything, less observant than I; but Alister's power of observation was remarkable, miraculous I thought it in those early years and am tempted to call it so still; he seemed to miss nothing from the inadvertently changed position of some small mantelpiece ornament to a tiny facial blemish on a quickly passing stranger; his sight was also remarkable (perhaps the one implies the other), especially his long sight; far out at sea in the dinghy he could pick out separate buildings in Storhaven when the town was a blur to me; and I have always considered my sight very good indeed.

If I chronicle none of his misdeeds and of his less engaging ways and habits at this period it is because they were the common ones of all young children; I am in any case inclined to think misdeeds is the wrong word; such actions were merely those of the realist which all the young of the human kind are; idealism, I imagine, enters with puberty. Alister's cry, at something under two, "Dead it, Father!" when a moth flew into the room was as right and proper and in keeping with his years as his rough handling of Tessa a year later when she took his toys. To match the realism of early childhood one must go to that of extreme old age; it is odd that all a lifetime of experience does is to bring one back to one's beginnings; this seems to strike a shrewd blow at human pretensions to possess a soul progressing slowly towards perfection. But perhaps one acquires a soul with puberty and sheds it after maturity is passed; a pleasing notion and one capable of exuding a good deal of fun if cunningly squeezed.

Tessa, as she passed from the formless fatness of babyhood into the slimmer gracefulness of childhood, was a pretty enough little thing, with fair curly hair, a fresh complexion much freckled, and violet eyes; her expression was usually one of quaint gravity, to which was allied a disinclination to talk unless she were with May, when she chattered away with surprising speed and with, by the time she was three, a command of language which was, by any other standard than that of Alister, quite remarkable. There is no blinking the fact that most of her affection went to May and what was left she shared between Alister and Paul; for me she had none; this neither surprised me nor hurt me; I had none for her, and affection, no doubt, usually begets affection. I did, however, tend at first to ascribe to her sex this extreme partiality for her mother, but when presently Paul was old enough to be demonstrative he too showed so marked a preference for May that I was forced to abandon that hypothesis for the true one. Tessa occasionally accompanied Alister and me in the trap, but she did not join in our talk at all, but sat, by her own desire, in the back of the trap, a solemn little image silently watching the passing scenery.

Paul, even fairer than Tessa, with straight, almost white hair, coarser in texture than Tessa's, was a sturdy youngster, sturdy and hardy in every way, physically and in the very grain of him. May, while fond of Tessa, was passionately fond of Paul; passionately seems to me the only word to describe her feelings towards him; watching her tending him I was often reminded of the quaint scriptural phrase "his bowels yearned over the child." This passionate fondness of May's seemed to me rather odd considering the efforts she had made to prevent his birth, and once, at a display of almost ridiculous tenderness on her part toward Paul, I was irritated into mentioning the matter. She made no comment, but later, when we were in bed, she referred to it and so warmly that it was plain she had been brooding upon my remark. "Well, damn it all, May," I expostulated, "it is a bit funny, surely;

you move heaven and earth to murder the poor brat in the womb and then as soon as he's born you make yourself perfectly ridiculous about him; if that isn't funny, what is?"

"Murder him!" she said harshly; "what are you talking about?" And she sat up in bed and stared at me furiously, her breathing rapid, her tone almost hysterical.

The humbug of that angered me, and I replied provocatively, "I'm talking logic; plain common sense; Paul was alive in the womb, wasn't he? And you tried to kill him; I admit I aided and abetted you, but that doesn't invalidate the argument, so for God's sake don't let's humbug about it."

She seemed about to strike me and I seized her arm roughly and said, "Don't be a fool; you're not pregnant now and there's no excuse for Angel Lane methods of connubial argument. If you're silly enough to hit me again I shall retaliate in kind." She dropped down on her pillow and as I released her arm she turned her back on me and drew the clothes over her head.

It did not occur to me then, but I have thought since that the love she had once borne me she had already transferred to Paul, and it was just because of this transference that it possessed that quality of passion which I found ridiculous to the point of offensiveness; the passion she displayed towards Paul was surely no normal manifestation of maternal love; I am surprised that it did not then occur to me to ascribe it to such an emotional transference, for I had already realised that her regard for me was a shadow of its old self; in her heart Paul was easily first; then came Tessa and Alister; I was well down the field, straggling behind, I often thought, some of her women friends.

Paul was, then, May's great happiness, her supreme joy, her heaven upon earth; and luckily for her he returned her affection as far as a child can do. His nature was in fact affectionate and given to demonstrativeness. He had a reckless, happy-go-lucky way with him which was very engaging, but

which led him into all sorts of hazardous escapades, resulting in cuts and bruises and bumps. May's life just then must have been a succession of shocks and alarms; her love going hand-in-hand with dread. But Paul went swaying and tottering on his way regardless of consequences, rarely crying over his hurts and quite unaffected by falls of the sort which had left Alister, at his age, ashen and trembling; in fact, when at the age of eighteen months, Paul took a headlong dive downstairs, it was Alister who screamed, went deathly white and fainted, while Paul gave one tremendous bellow and then picked himself up and toddled to May for a kiss and within a minute was raising a devil of a hullabaloo because she would not allow him to try another ascent. He was a bright, merry, dare-devil atom, and I regret now I did not show him more affection; but I had none to spare.

The three children from the first got on well together, and as soon as Paul was old enough to be companionable they played together amicably, with no more than the natural amount of bickering and squabbling. If anything, Tessa and Paul were fonder of Alister than he of them, but it is difficult to put a measure to such a light, variable thing as children's affection. But it seemed plain enough that the two younger ones had a considerable regard for their big brother and they certainly deferred to him and allowed him without question the leadership in their play, a leadership which he did not so much assume as take for granted. I had the notion at times that Tessa and Paul suffered me for Alister's sake, and more than once the disturbing thought intruded as I watched them that the three were linked in a unity which threatened to leave me outside; it was only a swiftly passing thought, wounding in its passage, but quickly forgotten, the quicker because I had only to make overtures and Alister at once deserted them for me.

When Alister was five he began his schooling at the St. Mary's National School. I very much disliked his going, not

merely because I thought the head mistress of the Infants' Department a pompous and semi-illiterate frump, but because, from my own experience as a scholar and a teacher, I entirely mistrusted popular education as a method of mental training. I had already taught Alister to read and write; he could read story-books intended for children several years his senior and he could write quite remarkable little original stories himself, or versions of those told or read to him; besides this he knew by heart dozens of simple poems and had the gist of many of the legends of Greece and Rome, as well as those from the Bible; I had been careful to include these old Hebrew tales, as I knew that once he went to school they would be foisted upon him under false colours, and I wanted him to be more or less armed against the imposture. But over and above this, and most important of all, he had at his command a surprisingly extensive vocabulary including a number of startling expletives, and despite the warnings I gave him about freedom of speech away from the home circle, I imagined his teacher would be in for many surprises and not a few shocks. I knew the woman who took the youngest children in the Infants' School; she was an amiable elderly person without any education herself, and I don't think it an exaggeration to say that Alister's command of the English language was considerably greater than her own.

When I first began to tell him stories I had contented myself with the old nursery tales, *The Three Bears*, *Cinderella* and so on, but these were soon exhausted and I had to look farther afield. I quickly discovered what a small and weedy pasture it was and later, when he was able to read for himself, I spent hours dredging publishers' catalogues and more money than I could afford in the purchase of suitable books; apart from the few fit to read among the time-honoured rubbish labelled classics there was a deplorable scarcity of books containing tales which were both good yarns and well-written. It was much the same with the poems he learnt, and for these I was in the end driven to compile a manuscript anthology for him

in a big ledger; it was continually added to, and by the time he was fifteen, when the ledger was full, it contained well over a hundred poems and excerpts, every one authentic poetry; I do not pretend he had them all by heart, but he had learned all those which had particularly appealed to him, for he had a free choice in the matter, just as when later he had the run of my library he was free to pick and choose where he wished.

He was, of course, from the beginning head-and-shoulders above the other children in his class at the Infants' School and when, after a year, Tessa became a scholar there he was in attainment ready to be promoted into the Boys' Department; but to my disgust I discovered that this was not allowed until he was seven and he would therefore have to mark time for twelve months. This struck me as so incredible a business that I went to see Mr. Ernest Packe, the head master. I am inclined to think that had we been on friendly terms the matter could have been arranged, but as it was he refused to budge from the strict letter of the educational law. I told him pretty frankly what I thought about a system which could impose such fantastic restrictions upon youthful ability, and I dare say I more than hinted that he was a very fit servant of such a system; but all I have now in my memory of that interview is a quite vivid picture of a flushed and rather hectoring figure holding open the street door of his house for me and muttering something about offensive innuendoes. That I allowed him to go so far seems merely to point to the fact that I was not unmindful that Alister would probably have to spend several years under his rule, and while I had no intention of allowing that rule to be harsh or unfair, I was well aware from Telfer's little ways how miserable a boy can be made by pin-pricks, each so small as to give no adequate grounds for complaint, but in the mass amounting to persecution. Whatever the offended Packe lost in argument he balanced by gaining the main point at issue, and it was not until Alister was seven years and five months that he passed into the Boys' Department. Consider the stupidity of

that! Because his birthday fell in March and classes did not change until August, he had to lose that additional five months. And by that time Paul was of school age, and when the schools reopened in September after the summer holidays, the three children went off together for the first time. I admit that Packe did not visit the sins of the parent upon the child, but treated Alister very well and won a good deal of his regard. Admitting so much, I am compelled to add that any other attitude in Packe would have been monstrous, for Alister in appearance, manner and attainment was a scholar of whom any pedagogue might be proud. And proud, in fact, he was, and promoted Alister rapidly, so that by the time he was eight he was in standard three, where most of the boys were ten and a few eleven, and none besides Alister under nine; but Packe's was an egotistical pride which ascribed Alister's swift progress to the quality of the school instead of to that of the scholar.

But before it was Paul's turn to go to school much had been happening in our family life both in a general way and in one alarming incident in particular.

May and I had by now reached a stage in our married life when our association was an uneasy affair balanced on an emotional knife-edge, a balance frequently disturbed by petty bickerings on the one side, and upon the other by occasional embraces which were on my part the mere satisfying of an aroused appetite and upon hers a submission to what was fast becoming a distasteful intimacy, akin, by reason of its utter lack of tenderness and passion, to outrage; these rare ravishings (for what else were they?) violated me no less than her and left us both repelled, humiliated, angry and ripe for conflict.

And side by side with this breakdown of our married life went the slow decline of the business, which had never surpassed the success of that first prosperous summer and which had ever since, except for occasional fillips, such as the book-peddling, shown a disconcerting tendency to slip downhill, a

tendency which by Alister's seventh birthday had become a definite and constant retrogression. This eventual failure after the propitious signs of that first summer I ascribed to various reasons, chiefly the unfriendly attitude of the townsfolk towards us (or it would be fairer perhaps to say towards me) and the questionable methods of our business rivals, who not only severally copied my ideas and lured away my regular customers, but collectively undercut my prices, for I am convinced they had sunk their own differences and rivalries and had banded themselves together to smash me; and the odds of three against one (for Freddy Goble had somehow managed to build up quite a tidy little business) were too much for me, handicapped as I was with a wife and family, a handicap which only a happy domesticity can change into a spur; and how much happiness was mine? Had it not been for Alister my domestic life would have been unendurable. I was to learn, however, that others (May especially) ascribed our business *degringolade* to other causes.

Alister's seventh birthday being fine and warm, we decided after dinner to drive to Blyfield, a pretty village some six miles from Storhaven, have a picnic tea in the woods and return before darkfall by a short cut across the moors. It was when we were starting for home that the accident happened. We had all taken our seats, Alister, as usual, beside me, the others inside, when Paul, clambering about in his reckless way, toppled out and the horse, startled, jerked forward and one of the wheels went over Paul's leg, cutting it to the bone and breaking it, although we did not know about the fracture until we reached Storhaven and May insisted upon sending for Dr. Mitchison. Paul's screaming ceased so quickly and he made so little fuss except an occasional whimper when his leg was touched that we did not realise the seriousness of his hurt, and making him up a little couch with coats on the floor of the trap, we set off on the bumpy road across the moor; he could not have been in any great pain, because he fell asleep before we reached home. When we came to examine

his leg it looked rather alarming and I was not surprised when Mitchison, after a glance, said curtly, "A fracture," and then, handling the leg gently, nodded, and with a smile said to Paul, "You're a big, brave man, eh?" There was an ugly-looking deep cut about five inches long running round the calf and going to the bone. Mitchison, after washing and dressing this, set the bone and put a splint on the leg. When he had finished he turned to me and as if answering a question said, "I shan't stitch; not yet, anyhow; we'll see how things go along first."

All the way home on that long bumpy journey across the moors May had been silent, sitting crouched beside Paul, trying to soothe him to sleep; indeed, I do not think from the time she gave a dreadful cry as Paul toppled headlong to the time she opened the door to Mitchison she said a single word; I may have forgotten, but that is the impression that remains with me, a cold, withdrawn silence, hostile, menacing; oh, yes, hostile and menacing, and before we slept that night I was to learn the reason.

I was first into bed and was composing myself to sleep after a trying day when, half-undressed, she came over and sat down on my side of the bed and said harshly, "And now you've nearly murdered one of the children perhaps you'll stop it."

I sat up in amazement. I was not angry; it was too futilely silly a remark to be angry about, but I was certainly annoyed at the prospect of bickering when I wanted to sleep. "What drivel are you talking now, May?" I asked.

"Drivel, is it?" she said; "I'm glad you think so."

I lay back and regarded her flushed, distorted face with aversion. "You've found your tongue at any rate," I commented; "more's the pity. Are you going to clack all night or are we going to sleep?"

"You can do what you like when I've had my say."

"Well, then, for God's sake get it over. What's it all about? Murdering the children or some such rubbish, wasn't it?"

"I asked you," she replied quietly, "if you'd give it up now that you'd almost murdered Paul."

"If you're going to talk like a hysterical fool I refuse to take you seriously, or to answer you," I said.

"I'm talking plain common sense, and you know it. You were drunk when you got into the trap and picked up the reins; you lost your balance and fell so heavily into the seat that you jerked Paul over the side and startled the horse and—"

"It's a damnable lie."

"It's the truth. How much beer did you swill in *The Royal Oak* at Blyfield between four o'clock and half-past five when you climbed into the trap? Tell me that."

"You'd better ask the landlord. Two or three pints, I should say."

"It's you who're lying. Two or three quarts is nearer the mark. And you were drunk, and a man who gets drunk when driving his wife and children is no better than a murderer if anything happens. Your drinking and gambling with those two beauties at *The Nelson* has ruined the business—"

"What!" I shouted, taking her by the arm and dragging her roughly towards me, "that's enough! Dry up before there's trouble; you're talking balderdash."

"It's the truth," she replied slowly and harshly, challenging me with a bitter look. I released her arms and with a contemptuous gesture I lay back on my pillow. "Have you finished?" I asked.

"You've ruined the business," she went on, "and now you're drinking, but for God's mercy, would have killed your child. Are you going to stop it?"

"D'you expect me to answer that?"

"Please yourself. I've told you the truth. It's not only what I say but what the whole town says. I don't want an answer in words but in deeds."

I did not reply, and getting off the bed she finished her undressing and presently got in beside me, and for all her

hysterical nonsense was asleep before I was. She had to get up to Paul several times during the night, as he was restless and thirsty.

We were by no means out of the wood in Paul's regard. Mitchison botched his job; the wound failed to heal and began suppurating, while the leg began to swell and inflame. Mitchison pulled a long face, said something about the bone having been badly damaged and that he feared necrosis, tried various treatments, and at the end of a month, when the inflammation had spread from the leg to the thigh, he had the effrontery to suggested amputation. May was beside herself with horror. I was merely infuriated. "Amputate the boy's leg," I said; "maim him so that he has to go through life like a bird with a broken wing. I'd rather see him dead first."

"That is what you probably will see him," Mitchison rejoined, "if you refuse your permission."

"I *do* refuse."

"Then I wash my hands of it; you'd better get other advice. But I must remind you, Mr. Carden—"

"You needn't remind me of anything. If the boy dies you're to blame, and no one else. You've botched the job and now want to mutilate the child to hide your mistake. So I'll beg to remind *you*, Dr. Mitchison, if—"

"That'll do, Carden!" the courteous mask and manner shed abruptly and an offensive smirk twisting his mouth; "I don't think anyone will need reminding who was primarily responsible for your little boy's condition."

"You get to hell out of here, Mitchison," I shouted, "before I assist you. One more bloody word from you and I'll give you something else to botch. Clear out."

He went, and without that other word. It was in its way a victory, but a pretty hollow one. What we were going to do about Paul still remained as the urgent problem. His leg was a horrifying spectacle. May was distracted, wild with fear, completely thrown off her balance and wringing her hands and crying. Presently she said in a distraught voice, "O God,

save him! O Christ, save him!" and went down on her knees and began to pray. She stopped after a moment and looked over to me helplessly. "Oh, if my father were here!" she said.

"By God! I believe you're right, May," I cried; "if anyone can save Paul's leg your father can." But she only shook her head and said, "It's too late now; it's too late; O Christ, save my Paul! O Mother of God, save my baby!" and began rocking herself backwards and forwards in an utter abandonment of control.

But I had no time for praying. I wrote out a detailed description of Paul's injury and the condition of his leg and wired it to Uncle Fred, asking him to wire instructions and to come down himself if possible. He already knew from our letters a good deal about the accident, and I trusted him to be able to prescribe something even at this eleventh hour. The reply-paid wire cost seventeen shillings and ninepence. Here is his reply: Wash thoroughly with distilled water stop apply hourly dressings of witch-hazel stop cannot get down till Thursday but will come then by first train stop if inflammation is lessening by Wednesday might apply ointment of marshmallow and slippery-elm stop you can obtain this at Brownlow's, 26 High Street, Lowestoft.

There is little more to tell. We saved Paul's leg. By the time Uncle Fred arrived at noon on Thursday there was a very definite improvement apparent, although we had not yet applied the ointment. Uncle Fred stayed a week and by then the injured leg, with its clean new flesh forming, had all the appearance of an authentic miracle. "Necrosis!" Uncle Fred had snapped as soon as he arrived, "amputate! My God, Richard, suffer little children, hey? suffer little children!"

I don't think I can add anything to that.

He was a great man, a fine man, Uncle Fred. I wish I could erase from my mind the memory of many things which happened years afterwards.

The following August Bank-holiday dawned so still and lovely a day that we decided to row in the dinghy two miles along the coast to Covehithe, a fishing hamlet, picnic there, do a little fishing and return in time for the fireworks on Storhaven Common.

We reached Covehithe about ten and spent the morning bathing and basking on the sands. After dinner we rowed out about a quarter of a mile and baiting my tipple-towing line I dropped it overboard, filled my pipe and rowed with the current, a strong loop of which flowed there rather fast, returning shorewards a mile or so north. May sat sewing in the stern with the children playing near her on the bottom of the boat. Even on the water it was close, with the sun blazing down on a glassy sea; and presently, as we slipped along, I let the oars rest on the water and closed my eyes. A scream startled me into wakefulness and I opened them to see Paul disappearing over the side; but more than that I saw in that instant; Alister made a jump to save his brother at the very moment I leapt to my feet, and the sudden heave of the boat shot him overboard. I was into the water almost as soon, caught sight of Alister some ten yards away and Paul's white head about ten yards farther off. I did not hesitate but made for Alister, collared him and, turning over on my back, struck out for where Paul had just sunk, reckoning to get him as he came to the surface. But a whole minute passed and he did not come up. May was screaming dreadfully and although she could not swim was preparing to jump in. "Stay where you are!" I shouted, "and row here," for the dinghy was now a good thirty yards away. She obeyed me with frantic haste and, swimming swiftly towards her, I hoisted Alister in and then returning, dived after Paul. But even as I went down I knew it was hopeless. The water there was six fathoms at least, and I was now doubtful whether I was anywhere near the exact spot where Paul sank. I could not reach the bottom at my first attempt, came up to breathe and went down again, peering about me as I neared the dark weedy floor; but I

could see nothing and again came up, and as my head broke the surface I caught sight of May leaning out of the boat, and the look of bleak anguish on her face appalled me. A dozen times I must have dived before I gave up the attempt which had long been futile, for it was then over twenty minutes since the accident. I swam to the dinghy, clambered in over the stern, and taking the oars, rowed slowly shorewards, without speaking to May, who was still sitting silent with that look of anguish, unmindful of Alister and Tessa sobbing in terror at her feet.

As I rowed in, keeping my glance from May, I faced the fact that I had deliberately chosen to save Alister first, and I knew that presently, when the numbing shock of her loss had passed, I should have to meet a reckoning from May for that choice.

It came that night after we had gone to bed. She did not undress, but sat down beside the dressing-table and watched me until I got into bed, when she said in a tone of the most bitter and accusing hate, "You let Paul drown."

"That's not true, May," I said gently. "I saved Alister first because he was nearest and—"

"Don't lie, don't lie," she said drearily, "for God's sake don't lie or I shall go mad. Alister can swim—"

"Swim, May," I broke in, "swim; how far? a dozen strokes, and he's never been out of his depth before. You know—"

"He was swimming when you saved him," she said bitterly; "he would have been all right; he has said so himself; you let Paul drown; you let Paul drown; you've never liked him; never cared at all for him, and now you've killed him; my Paul, my Paul; O God, my baby." She leaned forward in her chair, her body drooped, her fingers twisting distractedly in her lap. I thought she was about to cry and hoped with all my heart she would get that relief. But she did not cry and remained staring at the carpet, her face grey, drawn, distorted with grief, her fingers working in and out in a pitifully dis-

traught fashion. And presently she got up and without a word made her way to Tessa's room where she passed the rest of the night. She did not return to our bedroom for a long while, how long I have now forgotten, but it must have been several months. We never again cohabited.

Paul's body was washed up two days later between Covehithe and Storhaven and was buried in St. Mary's churchyard.

That calamitous day destroyed many things besides his brief life.

CHAPTER X

CUTTING LOOSE

FOR some months after the death of Paul the domestic atmosphere was so charged with accusation and hostility that more and more in the evenings I sought the company of Vosper and Batley, and by day that of Alister in the increasing leisure that the dwindling of the business forced upon me. I make no pretence that the tragedy affected me deeply; the death of a young child comes upon one with a feeling of shock and horror; but much of that feeling is largely illogical; and with no depth of regard for Paul I was able to view the matter from that sane standpoint while recognising that May's passionate love, now bereft and despairing, had no such comforting balm; for her, only time could bring healing. I did what I could for her, for I had only to allow the desolating thought to enter my mind that it might have been Alister to understand what the days meant to her in terms of pain; but it can be guessed how little it was I could do, I whom, in her heart, she believed responsible for her loss. But it was the effect of the disaster upon Alister which concerned me most; its effect upon himself and upon our relations with each other; here I was doubly haunted, terrified; for all I knew the delicate balance of his nervous system might be permanently upset by the shock; worse still, sensitive as he was to atmosphere, he might be influenced by May's hostility, and come also to regard me as the cause of his brother's death. I need not have worried; he threw off, quicker than Tessa, the shadow of the tragedy, that shadow which for some weeks undoubtedly darkened their lives, more especially during their playtime, now the quieter and less exciting for the absence

of the reckless, laughing boisterousness of their little brother. Less even need I have worried about his feelings towards me; he seemed, indeed, to draw even closer to me, if that were possible, as if to the love he already bore me he were now adding the small measure of affection which Paul could no longer ask from him. It was plain enough that Tessa felt Paul's death more deeply than Alister; perhaps, however, it would be truer to say she showed more evidence of deeper feeling, being, in fact, for over a week quite ill, white-faced, moping, listless, with no appetite by day and her nights disturbed by nightmare fits of screaming and bouts of uncontrollable sobbing; but it passed soon and left her unmarked. As for her attitude to me, she had always been May's child and had spared me little or no affection; there was now certainly a noticeable change inasmuch as she seemed to regard me with a touch of animosity and more than a trace of fear; but this change was chiefly noticeable because it moved from a negative condition to a positive one; but it was, nevertheless, an important change, for positive feelings contain the seed of growth; and hate, however powerless to injure, is no pleasant house-mate; and for that matter does not hate injure by its very existence?

But before that summer was over something happened which shocked and distressed me far more than the death of Paul. More and more, as I have said, I was driven by my unhappy home life to seek the company of Vosper and Batley, and they did not fail me. Every evening just before nine we met at *The Lord Nelson*, usually in the small room at the back, for the bar was invariably crowded with visitors, and we sat over our drink and talked and smoked till closing time, and often till long afterwards, for neither Vosper nor I had any reason for hurrying home, and as for Batley, he expressed it best himself, "The missis knows my habits and doesn't grudge me my friends; and she's not the nervous sort, afraid to go to kip unless a man's holding her hand; besides, there's two maids and Tom on the premises; and as for anything else,

why, when I do feel like a cuddle give me the morning; I've too big a load of beer on at nights and," with an expressive grimace, "liquor and love don't go well together with a man o' my build, *and* I'm telling you, old China."

Vosper, the previous winter, had been so ill that he had several times to remain in bed for two or three weeks, and the worst bout of all, accompanied by much haemorrhage, was during the bitter weather of the first week in March, weather which lasted till nearly the end of the month and then broke to sudden warm spring in a day. He did not pick up again with the arrival of summer, as he usually did, and the coming winter with its threat to his health was a not infrequent topic during our evenings together in *The Nelson*. It was always he who introduced the topic and he would discuss his own death with a detachment and a lack of emotion which astounded me who have never been able to contemplate my own death with feelings other than horror and disgust. What Batley really thought about it I can't say, but he pretended to take the philosophic view traditionally ascribed to the soldier, a tradition which is, I imagine, as false as most others; I say I imagine because I was fortunately never under the necessity of finding out by experience. "You don't peg out," I remember Batley saying, "until your time comes, and then when you *are* for it there's no dodging *that* column, so why worry your guts about it? One way an' another I've not had so dusty a time, and when Sergeant-Major Bones crooks his finger to me there'll be no squealing from this child; no, sir, there won't be that! I've had many a bellyful of good grub and good liquor and more'n my share o' the nicest little bedmates a man can put his arm round, white, yellow *and* black, and for what I call a real hot night I reckon the little black darlings can give all the rest a mile; barring the missis, o' course!" with a wink and a broad grin; "and so when the Old Boy asks for the last pass-word I'll give it quick and sharp, 'All Sir Garnet!' I'll say, 'All Sir Garnet, Soldier!' and he'll say,

'Pass, Mate! there's a good seat waiting round the fire; just shove a few parsons out o' the way.' "

" You're lucky," Vosper said quietly. " I'd give eternity if I had it, for one year of your healthy carcase, you lecherous old bastard. I'm thirty-four and I've never known what it was like to feel well. And I shan't see forty; it's a toss-up if I see thirty-five. I've cursed my earthly father since I was ten and I'll hand in my checks cursing my heavenly one. I was born half-dead and I've been eating up that other half ever since; not eating it up with living, burning it up with lust and appetite; my God, no! just nibbling my way through it like a maggot through an apple; just nibbling; afraid to take a bite lest it choked me; no, not afraid; I'm not that, damn the world's eyes! just unable to take a real bite; my father should have been hanged, drawn and quartered when he took on the job of procreation and his father before him; well, I've not done that; the only item on the credit side."

" Never one for the women, eh, soldier?" commented Batley thick-headedly. " R! you've missed a lot; grub's good; beer's good; 'bacca's good, but Holy Joc! woman! woman! Spin us a bit o' poitry about 'em, Carden. Not that poitry about 'em 's a patch on the little darlins themselves. Spoutin' about a girl's blue eyes and milk-white dairies and all the rest of it when you haven't one handy to check up the points is like a tankard with nothing in it. Like this one. Same again, eh? Don't look so down in the mouth, Davie."

" No, I was never one for women," Vosper said slowly, harshly, as if only then replying to Batley's remark; " you're quite right, Batley; and d'you know what you are?"

" Hazy sort o' notion, I reckon, Davie," Batley replied placatingly.

" A bloody fool. And I'm a bloodier."

" That's all right, old China," Batley replied amicably, but a trifle uneasily and more than a little bewildered at the bitterness in Vosper's voice. And to create a diversion he banged loudly upon the table with his tankard.

It was probably only a few weeks later than this when on the evening of September the twentieth Vosper did not turn up at the rendezvous. Batley and I played nap for a time, and about half-past ten Vosper arrived. He looked ghastly and ordered a double brandy instead of his usual pint of beer. He was not smoking himself, and as he sat down he began coughing, for the air of the room was close and heavy with the smoke from our pipes. Batley's glance caught mine and he put down his pipe. "Give it a rest, I think," he said; "got a bit of a burnt tongue."

Vosper looked from him to me, smiled grimly and then leaned forward in his chair in the way he had before delivering himself of some more than unusually biting remark. And then he put up his hand quickly to his mouth, tried to cough, fell back in his chair and with an appalling gurgling noise that haunted me for weeks, a bloody stream shot out of his mouth. As Batley and I jumped together from our seats to reach him he sagged in the chair and slipped to the floor. I think he was already dead when Harry Bender came hurrying in at our shout; certainly we did not need old Haldane's dismal confirmatory nod when some ten minutes later he came bustling in and made his brief examination.

I sent no flowers knowing, or thinking I knew, that anything of the kind would have been the last thing David desired. I attended the funeral, as did most of the townsfolk, and was rather amazed at the enormous and most expensive wreath, in the form of a broken link, which Batley had sent. He must have noticed my surprise, for he said in a half-shamefaced way, "It was all there was left I could do for the best pal I've ever had," and with that remark threw a white beam of light upon the lavish funerals of the poor which had been so marked a feature of the life about Angel Lane. It was, I realised in that moment, no desire for display which caused those poverty-stricken women to spend nearly all their available cash upon a funeral which would have done no

discredit to a merchant-prince, but was the only way left to them to show their love for the deceased. And as I thought about that and wondered at my obtuseness I remembered a talk I had had with Uncle Fred soon after I had come to Angel Lane. The newspapers were just then full of highly-coloured accounts of excavations being made in, I think, Mesopotamia, especially mentioning the many tombs of young children buried seven or eight thousand years ago with their toys beside them, a custom which, the accounts said, demonstrated in the view of eminent scientists, the belief of those ancient people in a future life, the toys being put beside the child so that on waking in the life beyond it should have its familiar playthings ready to hand. "Bunkum!" Uncle Fred had scoffed, "these precious scientific humbugs! a fat lot they know about the human heart. Nothing at all to do with a belief in a future life; I very much doubt if they did believe in it; I'll tell you, my boy, why some poor devil of a mother put those toys beside her dead little one; clear as daylight if you've ever lost a child, as I have; why, Richard, isn't it plain as a pikestaff that there beside the dead child was the only place for the toys, its own familiar little possessions; who else had any right to them? I don't say the mother didn't keep a sock or a shoe or a ribbon or so to cry over and put away and keep for years; but the toys, no! not the child's favourite ones, anyhow; in the grave beside the dead little one was *their* rightful place. These erudite buffers, my boy, know everything and understand nothing."

And as that conversation came slipping back into my memory I suddenly recollected that May had been alone for a long while in the room where Paul's body lay in its coffin. Was that why she had shut herself up with him? That night of Vosper's funeral, when Alister and Tessa were in bed and May was busy in the shop, I went to the toy-cupboard and rummaged about for some of the toys I knew had been Paul's favourites. I could not find them and I had a swift vision, a

vision I knew was true, of Paul lying in that small coffin in St. Mary's churchyard and beside him I saw his teddy bear, his humming-top and his red-white-and-blue bouncing ball. And suddenly I was moved and stirred by this realisation of bereaved and heartbroken love which linked May with those desolate mothers of long ago. I think that if then she had come in and found me beside the toy-cupboard—but what is the use of thinking such futilities? She did not come, and that is all that matters. There are moments like that in life which in recollection appear to be fateful, charged with illimitable possibilities; but probably that is a sentimental delusion; we delude ourselves in retrospect about so many things.

And yet that winter and the following spring May and I did in some ways draw a little closer; the strain eased, the tension grew less. That the credit was hers I admit; her bereavement made her, I imagine, sympathise with me in the loss of my friend. That loss was a very real one and hit me hard; it was the first time in my life that death had wounded me more than superficially. Vosper has played but a small part in this chronicle, but it must not be concluded that he played a small part in the ten years of my life at Storhaven; apart from Batley he was the only friend I made there, and there was much between David and me in which Batley had no share, was unable for many reasons to have a share; I drew from David often enough a mental, perhaps a spiritual, stimulus which I could get from no one else, from Batley with his gross boisterousness least of all. With David's death all that part of me which he made and shared died too; and, as is the way with three friends, there died, too, in Batley, his share of David; so that I was doubly bereaved. Batley, in fact, without that part of him which was David's was but a shadow of himself, an empty man, and it was this fact more than anything else which after David's death led me, if not to avoid his company, at least to seek it more and more infrequently; this hurt him, as I was to learn; but if I realised it I did not care; I had my own hurts to lick.

But more material matters than May's sympathy tended, however slightly, to draw us closer; the business was now toppling downhill fast and we had frequently to discuss not only ways and means of checking the immediate fall, but of discovering whether there were any future possibilities at all; one cannot talk over such things night after night on a footing of hostility, and, as I have said, relations slowly became friendlier; but it was no more than that and neither of us wished it to be. We came at last to the conclusion that the venture at Storhaven had failed and failed irretrievably, and that the best thing to be done was to clear out and begin afresh; we had settled that by the Christmas; but where to go and what to do remained problems which much cogitation during the next three months failed to solve. We studied the advertisement columns of *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *Dalton's Weekly*, but found nothing which our bankrupt condition (for such it actually was) permitted us to consider as a possibility. Perhaps bankrupt is an exaggeration; but without much doubt had we sold up then there would have been only a few pounds left after all our liabilities were met.

Alister's eighth birthday came and went; the summer season commenced, bringing a sort of wan fillip to the business, a fillip which did not, however, deceive us, and we continued our discussions and our dredging of the advertisements. And then, late in July, Uncle Fred wrote and suggested that May and the children should come to Maryfields for a week or two so that the children might see the sights of London. "I'll trot them round," he wrote, "and May can stay in and gossip with her mother and rest up and get a bit of peace and quiet. Nichols can run the business" (Nichols was his fully-qualified chemist-assistant), "as well as I can or better, and it's time, anyhow, I had a little holiday jaunt."

Uncle Fred's notion of peace and quiet in Angel Lane in July amused us, but for all that a week or so in town seemed to appeal to May, and I could see she was only waiting for my approval. There was really little to consider; the business

didn't matter now; I could do easily all that had to be done, and if I found I couldn't, well, it could go to the devil; "We'll drop the newspapers and periodicals," I said, "and I'll just carry on with the tobacco, confectionery and library" (our library service to the neighbouring villages had long been abandoned). "Why not shut up the shop for a fortnight and come with us?" May asked; and for a moment I was inclined to agree; but for some reason or other which I have now forgotten, the proposal, on further thought, did not appeal to me. "I don't think I'll do that," I said; "I'll stay and hold the fort. I'll get Mrs. Hanson to come in and do for me. You've not said anything to the children yet?"

"No."

"Well, I shouldn't for a bit; in case anything happens."

"Why, what could happen?"

"Oh, well, I don't know; but I'd rather you didn't."

May agreed, although obviously surprised at my request. I don't know if she guessed that it was based on my hope that Alister would not go. I didn't want him to go; I hated the idea of his being so far away from me as London, foreseeing a thousand things that might happen to him. Going sightseeing with Uncle Fred, a man of sixty at least, in London's congested streets seemed to me a risky undertaking. But more than this I hoped that when Alister learned I was staying at home he would refuse to go and it was for this reason I wanted to tell him myself. But to my dismay and chagrin he was so wildly excited at the prospect that beyond a casual, "Can't you come, Father? what a pity!" (perhaps it was only casual to my ears), he apparently gave no further thought to my remaining at Storhaven and abandoned himself to delicious daydreams of the wonderful treat in store.

Two days later I went to see May and the two children off by the nine o'clock morning train and Alister was still in the clutch of that heady anticipation, more so than ever, perhaps; he could not keep still on the platform, laughed and chattered and ran up and down restlessly, and when at last

the train came in he was so overwhelmed with excitement that his farewells were hasty and perfunctory (or so they seemed to me), and I was left standing on the platform waving to May (what was Alister doing? Looking out of the window at the other side, no doubt, I thought bitterly), and feeling more sick at heart than I would have cared to confess.

I went back to the damnable little shop in a mood of depression, disgust and not a little self-pity; life was a cheat, the world a sink, and Storhaven the foulest spot in that sink. I moaned about for the rest of the day, my nerves on edge, surly with the customers whose eyes I was ready to damn at the faintest provocation; and closing the shop an hour before the usual time, I went across to *The Lord Nelson* and received a warm and hearty welcome from Batley, with whom I had not passed an evening for some weeks. We made a night of it, and somewhat cheered by his warm welcome and the liquor, I slept well and took a somewhat brighter view of life in the morning. But the mood of depression returned and I again sought the same remedy; and, indeed, for the first week of May's and the children's absence I did not once go to bed until the early hours of the morning and I was then so drunk that to stagger home was the most I could manage, and I fell into bed, or rather on to my bed, all-standing, as Batley would have said.

The one gleam of brightness during that first week was a letter from Alister; it was the first I had ever received from him, and I have it now among all the others he was later to write: Dear Father: London is lovely and we are enjoying ourselves ever so much. We have been to the Zoo, the Crystal Palace, Madam Tussards, st. Georges Hall and lots of cinemas, but I like the 'bus rides best of all, and so does Tessa and Uncle Fred. I do wish you were here and Uncle Fred told me to say shut up the poison shop and come along up. I wish you would, and so does Mother and Tessa. We went to St. Saviour's Church the day before yesterday, and I liked that too. I would like to go to Church again next Sunday. The

weather is very hot and Mother says tell Father Angel Lane is an oven and more smely than ever. No more now, Father darling, from your loving ALISTER,

That letter arrived on the Wednesday morning just a week after they had left Storhaven, and on the Friday evening, not finding Batley in *The Nelson*, I made a round of the public-houses, mixing my drinks recklessly, so that by eleven o'clock I held all I could safely carry and made my way home. I woke about two o'clock and, unable to drop off again, I lay for a long while staring out of the window at the sky which either had not entirely darkened or already was paling with the first faint promise of dawn. I felt wretched, sick and more miserable than I had ever felt in my life. Never before had so black a fit of despondency possessed me; I reviewed my life and found it vile; there was no light anywhere in the darkness; even Alister, I thought in the depths of that bitter mood, had turned, was turning, against me; had already found and would find more and more interests in which I should have no share; and in the bitter wretchedness of that grey retrospect I cursed my life and wished I were dead. I dozed off to sleep some time after full dawn had come, waking again about seven, feeling much better but tormented with a burning thirst which I slaked from the ewer and then returned to bed. The shop could go to the devil; I was not going to get up; not yet, anyhow; I'd other things to think of; or rather one other thing; a big thing upon which might hang the happiness of the rest of my life; for in that slow walk from the bed to the wash-hand-stand I had decided to fire the shop and with the insurance money start a new life with May and the children. And so I lay on my back and, my eyes busy with the criss-cross on the dirty patina of the ceiling, planned how best I could stage the affair. I hit upon and rejected a dozen schemes and by eight o'clock realised that it was by no means plain sailing. Two dangers equally great, I had already by then decided, were to be guarded against; the too elaborate plan and the too simple one; something midway

was what I needed. By nine o'clock I had found no solution and as Mrs. Hanson had knocked at my door several times, I got up, ate a good breakfast, and then filled my pipe and went into the shop to smoke and ponder and wait for customers. Fortunately few came in to interrupt my thoughts, and about eleven o'clock it came to me suddenly that the only safe method was the one most dangerous to my person. I would stage a straightforward fire and then remain in my bedroom till the last moment, until, if possible, I were lugged out by the firemen, although the Storhaven brigade, with its old manual engine was a frayed rope to hang one's life upon. But if the risk were great so was the prize; furniture and stock were insured for seven hundred and fifty pounds, and I reckoned the insurance company would pay out about six hundred, which would leave me four-fifty to five when all our accounts were paid. Sunday night, I considered, would be the best time (or rather, of course, the early hours of Monday morning), and having now settled the question, I thrust it from my mind, and to keep it from intruding set myself to make an inventory of the contents of the shop and house.

It was I suppose one of the simplest pieces of arson ever planned and it succeeded admirably. At a few minutes before half-past one on the Monday morning I lit my bonfire in the paraffin soaked kitchen and leaving the door to the stairs open I went back to my bedroom and shut the door. Leaving the kitchen door open nearly cost me my life, for the place was a furnace by the time the brigade got to work and, true to my determination to hang on to the last minute, I left it too long and fell unconscious before I could get to the window. The two firemen (they were Ted Pike the butcher and George Paston one of my rivals) who luckily got into the room a few minutes later made rather a clumsy job of getting my eleven stone of gauntness down to the pavement; they could hardly be blamed, for it was a roasting job and

the roof fell in while they were half-way down. I was therefore sufficiently abraded, blackened and scorched (most of my hair was singed off) to have served as a complete refutation to a dozen charges of arson. I needn't have worried; as far as I knew there was not the faintest suspicion against me; not, at any rate, in quarters which counted; what Storhaven thought I didn't bother about. The insurance company paid me in full; it seemed a fortune; and when every account had been settled I had the fat sum of nearly six hundred pounds to finance whatever new venture we might decide upon.

What Storhaven thought, I didn't, as I say, bother about; but I had more than a notion that Goble at least imagined things. The day following the fire, as I was limping along the High Street, my head and hands much bandaged, although not at all painful, I ran into Goble, whose shop and house had also been burnt out. "Narrow shave *you* had!" he said, with amazing amiability.

I nodded.

He gave me a queer glance. "D'you know," he said slowly, "I thought I smelt something funny after I'd gone to bed on Sunday night. Something nasty."

I regarded him blandly out of my only available eye. "That nose of yours must be a trial, Goble," I said, "apart from its shape and size. Hope you're insured."

"Mustn't grumble," he replied with a sidelong glance and a twitching grin. "You are?"

"Mustn't grumble," I mimicked; "Well, I can't stay gossiping. Sorry I can't ask you to have a drink but Haldane's put me right off liquor till my burns are better."

I gathered from Goble's amiable manner that all had not been well with the fruit business and that the fire had been a godsend; it was, in fact, a happy little affair all round and if there were a man in Storhaven more pleased than Goble or me it was old Hubert Oakes, the owner of the two houses,

who had been vainly trying to sell them for years. It's a rare wind that blows everyone good.

Three days later, with six hundred pounds snug in my pocket, I shook from my feet the damnable dust of Storhaven. I said good-bye to Batley the previous evening after many valedictory drinks together in *The Nelson*. We strolled along the cliff before turning-in for the night; I was sleeping at *The Nelson*. It was during that stroll he told me, in a halting, stumbling, jerking sort of embarrassed monologue, how hurt he had been after Vosper's death when I had seemed about to break off the friendship between us and how tremendously happy it had made him when things began once more to take on something of their old footing. "This last week, Carden, 's been more to me 'n I can say," he blurted out finally, almost lachrymose in his fervour. The beer he had been drinking doubtless played some part in his emotional outburst but most of it was genuine and sincerely felt; he was I am sure, Vosper being dead, fonder of me than of anyone else in the world, with the possible exception of his complaisant and plump wife. I did not want him to go on until he reached the maudlin stage and so I took him by the shoulder and turned him about with boisterous roughness and we steered our course for *The Nelson*. I stood a moment under the archway before entering and grasped his hand. "Good-bye, Batley," I said warmly, "I'm not sorry to be leaving Storhaven but I'm damn' sorry our good times together are over."

"Bye, old China; bye, Carden, ol' man, and all the best," he said gruffly, a forlorn undertone in his deep voice. He gripped my hand, shook it up and down a dozen times, dropped it hurriedly and turning away went lumbering off not too steadily over the cobbles of *The Nelson* yard. I watched his ponderous bulk till it passed the corner by the stables and then I went in and after another drink (Haldane's warnings I had obeyed for no more than twelve hours) I went to bed. I never saw Batley again or heard of or from him.

I reached Angel Lane in time for supper. My welcome was warm, even Tessa seemed pleased to see me, and I thought there was a trace of the old affection in May's smile; while Alister, so undemonstrative as a rule, clung to me, kissing and caressing me so overwhelmingly that in sudden reaction from my wretched thoughts of the past week concerning him I found my voice unsteady as I turned away to greet my uncle and aunt; and I welcomed his "Oh, Father, your hair does look funny!" as an excuse for laughter to hide my emotion.

"You do look a bit frayed, my boy," Uncle Fred said, his eyes twinkling, "but there's nothing like a singe to renew the hair's vitality, and May tells me you were beginning to get thinnish on top."

"A foul libel," I laughed; "and how are you, Aunt Alice? you look younger than ever; why, hang it all! we might all be brothers and sisters; what's the recipe, Uncle?"

"The mixture as before," he chuckled; "plenty of work, an easy conscience and the bowels well open. Let's have supper and then we'll have a chat when the little pitchers have folded their ears in sleep."

After supper, the children in bed, I expanded my brief version of the fire which I had written to May the day after it happened. I had suggested to her in that letter that she should say as little as possible to the children about it, and all she had told them was that there had been an accident, that I had been a trifle scorched, and that they were not going back to Storhaven.

"They're *not!*" I said, as May ended her account of the catechism she had endured from the children; "and really," I went on, turning towards Uncle Fred, "that's about all that's definitely settled. I dare say May has told you how the business stood at Storhaven, and without beating about the bush, Uncle, the fire was a godsend. And not only to us," I added with a grin, and related my encounter with Goble. "We've nearly six hundred pounds behind us now, and I don't imagine it'll be too difficult to make a fresh and more promising start.

We needn't rush into anything; we can afford to wait and look round."

"Thinking of keeping to the same line or breaking into fresh woods and pastures new?" Uncle Fred asked, with an odd glance.

"God forbid!" I ejaculated, looking over to May for confirmation, and at her nod continuing, "if I weren't a smoker I'd consign all the tobacco and newsagents' shops to the devil. I want something about as far removed from that accursed venture as fire is from ice."

"Well, that's something on the positive side, anyhow," Uncle Fred said genially; "d'you mind a word of advice?"

"Welcome it."

"You're mellowing, my boy! there was a time when you'd flush up and gobble if I ventured on the mildest morsel. Well, then, here it is; do nothing about it for a few days; don't even think about it; trot round with May and the children and see the sights and then at the end of the week we'll hold a family council. Well?"

"Good enough."

"Fine. And I'll confess I'll not be sorry to hand over the job of conductor to you, my boy; if there's a more exhausting job for a man of sixty than running two excitable youngsters round London I'd be glad to hear of it. And now let's plan the next few days for you; it'll give me no end of pleasure; the sort of pleasure I imagine the mediæval torturers took in sharpening and oiling their instruments."

In bed that night May said suddenly, "Was the fire altogether an accident, Richard?"

"An accident?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean did I fire the damned place?"

"Well," hesitating a little, "I mean——"

"Good Lord, May!" I interrupted with a laugh, "of course I did! You don't imagine bits of luck like that just happen, do you? You've got to make 'em happen."

" You ran a terrible risk," she replied quietly, after a long pause.

" I had to; that was the key-note; the king-bolt; puts the whole affair on a higher plane than mere money-grubbing arson; art, May, that's what it was, sheer art; but I admit I overdid it, and if Pike and Paston hadn't been slippy for once in their lives there'd have been life insurance money to collect as well. Might have been better for you, eh?" She made no reply to that half-facetious, half-serious thrust, and I went on, " Queer that Paston should have been the one to yank me out of the mouth of hell."

" I was thinking more of the children," she said.

I missed her meaning. " If I'd been killed?" I rejoined; " I don't see——"

" No," she broke in; " it was the risk of prison I meant, Richard. It would have been dreadful for the children if you'd been caught."

" It would 've been a damn sight more dreadful for me!" I retorted warmly. " No doubt," I went on sarcastically, " it's the maternal point of view, but I think you might have kept it to yourself for to-night, anyhow; not exactly what one would call a welcoming remark."

" I'm sorry, Richard; I didn't mean it in that——"

" Nor," I went on angrily, " not precisely the best accompaniment to the jaunts we've all been planning. Perhaps you'd rather I didn't come."

" I am sorry, Richard," she repeated distressfully; " please don't let it spoil things for the children."

" Already spoiled for you, I suppose?"

" They're not at all. I'm looking forward to it. Richard," putting her hand upon my arm.

" What?"

" Can't we make the best of things for our own sakes as well as for the children's?"

" Damnation! isn't that what I'm trying to do! And then

you jolt in with a pleasant remark like that. Let's drop it now; I want to go to sleep."

It was certainly not an auspicious beginning for a holiday; but for once the omens were false. I think May regretted her tactlessness and set herself to make amends in every possible way during those five days we spent sight-seeing with Alister and Tessa; certainly it was the happiest time I had had for a long while, and I was not ungrateful. I am inclined to think my nerves were in a bad way, for my emotions were by no means under control, and I allowed my gratiuude to move me to an attempt at love-making when we were in bed on the Friday night after a long and very happy day at Kew, Hampton Court and Richmond. I was fool enough to think that May wanted this, and it was gratitude and no other emotion which moved me to proffer what had once been so welcome, so gladly received, so passionately returned; and when she repulsed me, pushing me away (gently enough, it is true; but is there a worse brutality than such gentleness?) and moving to the edge of the bed, I lay rigidly still, overwhelmed with chagrin, dismay and humiliation, cursing the impulse that had betrayed me, cursing and hating myself and the woman who had so wounded me; but her the more bitterly because she had taken advantage of my generosity to stab me. But that mood of malignant fury did not last long, and before I fell asleep I was already taking a more reasonable view of the matter and seeing not only that May had acted rightly, but that any renewal of love-making after all that had happened would have been the worst possible way of making a fresh start after the disastrous venture at Storhaven. It was the last time I was ever to proffer love to May; even such factitious love as I had then proffered. At times during the next few years I imagined that May regretted that repulse of me; to the best of my recollection, after the first furious chagrin, I was never other than glad.

We held the family council on the Sunday evening and from the very beginning Uncle Fred dominated the proceedings. He was in almost boisterous spirits and his nods and winks to Aunt Alice and her smiles in return seemed to point to some shared and delightful secret.

"Well, you two jaded holiday-makers," he began; "it's high time we got down to brass tacks, put our cards on the table and talked horse sense and hard cash. First of all, my boy, have you got anything in your eye? or you, my dear?" We both shook our heads, and he rubbed his hands together, hitched his chair a bit closer, smiled round the small circle and then continued, "Now I propose to do all the talking for a bit and afterwards you can have your say? All serene? Good. You don't need me to tell you that if I've one love in the world, apart from human beings, it's flowers; I don't think our little garden here can be matched anywhere in the East End of London and if you say nor the West End, my boy, I won't contradict you unless you go farther afield and lug in Kew. Right. It's just been a labour of love and if others have shared in the results so much the better. We've lived in Angel Lane over twenty-five years and they've been happy ones with plenty of hard work attached; but there hasn't been so much work that I'd no time for dreaming; if I'd not been a bit of a dreamer I'd not have had a garden in a slum; that was one of my dreams and I made it come true; but all along I've had another dream, a dream of one day retiring into the country and giving all my time to this love of mine. A pleasant scheme which my conscience approved; but recently some odd strain in me, from my Yorkshire blood perhaps, has been nudging me as it were and saying there's no harm in a bit of cash with the love-making, is there? What marriage, for example, this mercenary nudger has suggested, is so happy and successful as one where there is both love and money? Not to be denied the logic of that, hey, my boy? Good. Beginning to twig?

Not altogether; I'm afraid Storhaven has fogged your intellectuals both of you; I've noticed Suffolk folk are a bit slow in the uptake, although they're sound enough once they get their teeth in; silly Suffolk, they say, don't they? Not so silly one or two I've met recently, by the bye; but that's another story. What I'm driving at is that I propose to retire, (I'm not absolutely penniless)" with a chuckle, "and cultivate flowers, first for the love of 'em and second to sell; and not only flowers but vegetables; in short a nursery. But I don't, as you know, do things in the air; I'm not one of those who work everything out on paper and then hope to fit the reality into the plan; I see what the reality's like first and then cut the plan accordingly. And so for the past six months or so I've left the very efficient Nichols to look after the business (its wheels are so well-oiled now that I believe it could run itself) and I've been spying out the land. The first land I spied in were the counties of Kent, Sussex, Hampshire, Dorset and South Devon, the English Channel coastline, as you might say, for there was the ideal soil and climate for my purpose. But I found practically the whole of this district had already been appropriated, by close-fisted florists and nursery-men intent upon exploiting the rich markets of the neighbouring holiday resorts, which markets in fact they had already captured; had I been a young man I might have gone in for the gamble and tried to force my way in; but I'm too old for that and besides it's not my notion of enjoying flowers; I want to run a profitable concern but I'm not going to tread my dream underfoot for the purpose of squeezing out a few extra hundreds. And so I gave up the attractive notion of fighting the close-fisted gang in possession and went farther afield, to North Devon in fact; and there, unless I'm very much mistaken, I've found what I want. It's a fine twelve-roomed house in nine acres of good ground on the outskirts of Boughton, a village some eight miles from Barneford and about six from Felcombe; those are the two nearest towns and there's nothing else in the neighbourhood but

scattered villages, the nearest to Boughton being Upton, four miles away. The house is known locally as Jack's Folly, has never been occupied and was built about four years ago by an eccentric farmer of that name who shot himself the day the last brick was laid. Boughton hasn't a railway station, only a halt and one has apparently to flag the trains; but that's all right; it's an officially recognised halt; I ascertained that important fact right away. Jack's Folly (we'll continue to call it that for the present) is perfectly situated, well, almost perfectly, for where's perfection this side of heaven? on the sheltered side of rising ground facing south and about an hour's brisk walk from the sea. Besides Barneford and Felcombe (prosperous resorts, by the bye) there's the biggish town of Darum ten miles to the East, where the local railway connects with the main line; a sound situation then as regards markets. Time I cut the cackle, hey? Right. I negotiated then and there with the agents." He grimaced and made an expressive gesture with one hand. "Richard, my boy, if the Creator had never thought of hell he'd have been forced to as soon as land agents appeared on this fair earth. And this one was the downiest bird of the lot. Fifteen hundred for the house and twelve hundred for the land! That's all he asked and fifteen hundred would 've been handsome for both and twelve hundred generous. We slanged each other for hours; you know, my boy, the courteous sort of back-handers; but I'll admit I was no match for him; they say it takes ten Jews to diddle a Greek and ten Greeks to twist an Armenian; well I'll go bail the whole bunch couldn't have bested that plump smiling little Welshman; of course he was Welsh and a Jones; *and* Evan Jones! And so, my boy, here's the core of all the gabble: I bought Jack's Folly and the land, all freehold, for two thousand five hundred pounds and I'll not deny it made a fairish hole in my savings; still we've a farthing or two left and when we sell up here there'll be a trifle more; but not quite all I hoped to have, allowing a wide margin for safety; that is

to say for the whims and tricks of nature, for that's the lady we'll have to coax and cozen. And so, when you came bouncing along with six hundred in your pocket it occurred to me that you might like to come into partnership on a fifty-fifty basis. Now then, what d'you say, my boy? And you, May?"

"But hang it all, Uncle," I laughed, "putting in six hundred pounds wouldn't give us a right to fifty per cent. You've already spent nearly three thou——"

"Pooh!" thumping the table and smiling and nodding, "and isn't May my daughter and my only chick and aren't you the father of our grand-chicks? If that's your only objection we'll call it a deal."

"Don't rush us, Father," May laughed; "give us a night's sleep on it."

"There's no hurry; take a week if you like, or if you'd prefer to run down and take a look at the place we'll all go down. Can you drive a car, my boy?"

"Just about; but my driving's like the man's whose doctor told him he ought to use his car less and take more exercise: 'more exercise!' he said, 'you've evidently not seen my driving.' But why?"

"Well, you see, I've bought a car. Thought it would be rather jolly; and it'll come in useful for the work down there, although we'll need a van as well. Glad you can drive; now what d'you say?"

I looked over at May and she smiled and said, "We'll tell you in the morning."

And at breakfast next morning we very gladly accepted the offer of the partnership but declined the proposed run down as May said she'd need to do a good deal of buying in the way of household requirements.

I looked over at her a trifle blankly. "Damnation! May," I said, "we're forgetting we'll not have anything like six hundred to put in by the time——"

"Bunkum!" Uncle Fred laughed; "no slinking out now;

the six hundred's already in and the firm in being : Rayner & Carden, Nurserymen and Florists; and therefore all purchases henceforward from this moment come out of the firm's resources and you needn't worry about that; half the fat men prancing about the Stock Exchange would give their paunches to be half as sound. So *that's* settled. As for the run down to Boughton, I'm inclined to think it 'd be waste of time; we've plenty to do here if we're going to get away by the middle of September, as I hope; you can take my word for it that the property is as good as I've said it is. All agreed now and everyone happy? Right!"

CHAPTER XI

BOUGHTON

We did not after all get settled into Jack's Folly until the end of October. We re-named the place The Sunnyside Nurseries, but it was not for several years that the new name ousted the old in local talk. I copy here one of our bill-heads of a year or so later: The Sunnyside Nurseries, Sole Proprietors: Frederick Rayner, Alice Rayner, Richard Carden, May Carden. 'Phone Boughton 6; Telegrams Sunnyside Boughton; Station Boughton. Terms Cash.

The reason for the delay in getting into our new quarters was the water supply which Uncle Fred had, oddly enough, overlooked. There was only one well about twenty feet deep and the amount of water available was hopelessly inadequate. We had the well deepened to fifty feet and another of the same depth sunk, with windmill-pumps erected over each, the work costing over three hundred and fifty pounds, and only by the most persistent bullying of the contractor was it finished in time.

Apropos of his qualifications as a nurseryman Uncle Fred revealed a to me hitherto unknown chapter in his variegated life; he had, as a young man of nineteen, spent a year in the Meadshire Agricultural College. "It was a three years' course," he told me, with the familiar twinkle in his eyes, "but I fell out with the authorities at the end of my first year with mutual expressions of repugnance. The trouble was that they treated us as children when it suited them and expected us to be men when it suited them; I found this double rôle too exacting and decided to stick to the child character and my invariable assumption of a wistful childlike

simplicity threatened the whole fabric of the college discipline and, as something had to be done about it, the authorities decided to dispense with my company. I claimed the return of the fees already paid and I'm proud to say I got them. But I learned a few wrinkles there which I hope I'll now be able to turn to account, although few things have altered in the past forty years more than methods of agriculture. But there are a few axioms which I've no doubt are still and always will be true."

But apart from this dubious qualification of Uncle Fred's we were poorly equipped for the task we had undertaken. Aunt Alice, May and I possessed none of the special knowledge required and Uncle Fred was, after all, only a gifted amateur; and whether it be football, cricket, boxing, painting, writing books or raising crops the professional can give the amateur a handsome start and a handsomer beating. The one thing that, in the first few years, saved us from complete disaster was the depth of Uncle Fred's purse; and as time and again we dipped into this I realised what a bagatelle our six hundred pounds had been and that what had really happened was that he had taken upon his shoulders my own family responsibilities, using the six hundred pounds as a cloak to hide his generosity and to save my face.

That first winter was luckily mild and dry; we took on immediately five labourers in order to get the land ready as quickly as could be done and by the beginning of March had three and a half acres broken up and prepared for planting. All this was, of course, outlay of capital with nothing coming in and in addition there was our domestic expenditure. We had two maids, both local girls; Aunt Alice did the cooking and May shared her time between the house, the children and the business, in which she was handy-woman and secretary-typist. My own job was mainly to get into touch with wholesalers, seed-merchants and the Trade generally and since our terms were cash with order we were welcome cus-

tomers. It was, of course, Uncle Fred's capable if amateurish hands which controlled all the springs of the business.

Most of the stock we purchased for our first season, that is to plant the three and a half acres, was intended for the cut-flower trade, chiefly gladiolas, scabious, sweet peas, peonies and gaillardias. Our southern boundary was a main road and as we had a good breadth for each of our beds they attracted much attention from passing traffic, especially during the holiday season, and we had frequent visitors expressing much admiration and a desire to "take a few away"; this was most gratifying to Uncle Fred's passion but it wasted much of our time and brought us a negligible return and I finally got him to agree that it must be stopped; we simply couldn't be bothered with casual visitors, however flattering; if they wished to admire they could do it from the road and as for sales, we were, I pointed out, not flower-women in Piccadilly Circus.

As our blooms developed they were gathered, bunched and sent to the salesmen in Barneford, Felcombe, Darum and as far afield as Bristol. And here we experienced our first shock of disillusion. When our weekly returns came in (and they came in well, for we were already producing large quantities) we found to our consternation that the prices we were receiving were less than half those quoted in the Trade papers. Uncle Fred rubbed his nose and regarded a particularly poor batch of returns. "Sinister's the word, my boy," he smiled; "must be brothers of that rascal Evan Jones. You'd better see some of the sharks and tell them we may run a nursery but we're not green all over."

May, however, suggested that there was probably an explanation other than dishonesty and she was right, as I discovered when I interviewed our two biggest salesmen, one in Barneford and the other in Darum. They both told the same story and with equal bluntness. "Your stuff," they explained with an almost contemptuous wave of the hand

(Oates, the Darum man, was as near as he'd ever been in his life to being picked up and trounced) "your stuff is not properly prepared and packed for market and is therefore sold at any price to get rid of it."

"Then why the devil weren't we told?" I asked angrily; "we're not covering market dues and rail charges." My manner must have annoyed him for he took the opening I'd so foolishly given him.

"Not my job," he replied surlily, "to tell people how to do theirs."

It was then that I nearly man-handled him; but I thought better of it and turned away. It was well I did, for he was a little runt of a fellow with a limp, born and bred in Devon, and I'd have had the whole county about my ears.

"So that's the flea in the bed, is it?" Uncle Fred laughed when I reported the result of my inquiries; "well, we live and learn. We must learn a bit more. Or rather *you* must, my boy. Follow?"

"More or less," I smiled, "in a general way; but what's the particular one I can see you're driving for?"

"You'll have to go up to London for a month, take a room at some not too expensive hotel handy for the City and then put in four weeks early, *very* early, morning work in Covent Garden; I know Porson's man there and he'll shepherd you for a bit but your job 'll be to ingratiate yourself with the salesmen and absorb wrinkles to saturation point; you'll need some money for the ingratiating process but that's a minor point; when can you go?"

"To-morrow, first train."

"Right."

I went. I did not stay more than three weeks, for by then I had learned all I wanted to know about the orthodox Trade manner of handling flowers and I was spending more of the firm's money (Uncle Fred's money rather) than I cared about. Moreover, I was missing Alister; it was the longest

time we had been away from each other and his frequent letters, while very dear to me, were poor substitutes for his presence. I should, in fact, have returned to Boughton at the end of a fortnight had not something occurred which was, I imagine, inevitable sooner or later in the circumstances. I consider the occurrence quite unimportant, ephemeral, except in its ultimate effect upon me and I relate it merely because it was thus significant; I don't think morality enters into it and therefore my relation of it is no attempt to dislodge myself. It was, as I say, inevitable in the circumstances. What were those circumstances? Simply these: After ten years of normal married life I had perforce abstained from sexual indulgence for over twelve months; I say perforce and that is strictly true; the professional purveyor of cash embraces repelled me and always had done; May was the first woman I had known in the intimate sense of that word and she was the only one I knew during those ten years. And then, abruptly, that normal sexual rhythm reached by ten years of marriage was overthrown; I was checked, damned, denied an outlet. This condition had lasted over twelve months and I am not going to pretend that it caused me any great inconvenience or disturbed me deeply; there were times, of course, when it pushed itself into the forefront of my consciousness, beset and worried me; but it passed quickly enough; the fact was, I think, that for the first time for many years I had a job which interested me and was working long hours (almost literally from dawn till sunset) with an energy which left me at the day's end with little desire for anything except a meal, a drink and a pipe or two before turning in; and I slept like the dead. So much for the circumstances; now for the very commonplace occurrence.

I had gone up to London on a Monday and put up at *The Orchard Hotel* in the Strand. The following Friday week, when I was already thinking of returning to Boughton, about eight in the evening I went into a restaurant near Piccadilly

Circus for a meal; there were very few people in the grill-room, about the same number in fact as the bored and fatigued-looking waiters standing about with that air of introspective gloom which seems the mark of their kind at such moments of enforced idleness. I looked at the menu, gave my order and then glanced at the only occupant of the next table. She was a woman in the early thirties, small, fair-haired, rather plump, pretty; her dress was something more than respectable, something less than smart; a difficult sort of young woman to place and I am no good at placing people, women least of all; or rather I was not then. She caught my glance, held it, and smiled slightly but quite frankly. I don't know whether or not I achieved a slight smile in return but I know I was half surprised and dropped my glance to raise it a moment later and again meet her smile. It was not a provocative smile or an inviting smile, or so it seemed to me, but just a friendly one; the sort of smile two strangers may exchange when watching the antics of a child or animal. I returned the smile this time without any doubt and then she said, "I wouldn't have the plaise if I were you; I've just had some and it's horrible." Her voice was much the same as her appearance, neither cultured nor illiterate, with no particular accent, difficult to place but pleasant enough; just as she was a pleasant, quite attractive, ordinary sort of young person. "I won't, then," I replied. "Perhaps the sole's better?"

"It couldn't be worse!" she said with a little laugh. It was a fascinating laugh, easily the most alluring thing about her. "I fancy," I said, "I'd enjoy it better at your table."

"Of course you would," she replied; "come along over." And then she added, without any embarrassment, "You'll not have to pay for my dinner, y'know. It's my supper, really."

"That's all right," I smiled, as I took the chair opposite hers; "we'll toss who pays for both, if you like."

That was the beginning of one of the strangest yet pleasantest associations of my life; it lasted eight days and there was a gap of three days during which I did not see her at all. She was the frankest and most commonsensical person I had met; I had, in fact, not the remotest notion that there existed women like her; she was something entirely new in life; a valuable piece of education. There was never any question of our being passionately in love or in love at all; we just liked each other very much indeed and satisfied a mutual need.

She was, she told me during that first meal, the wife of a sailor in the merchant service; he was mate of a boat trading between Liverpool and South America and was away for periods of three months at a stretch and his times at home were frequently only for a week or less. They were very fond of each other, she said earnestly, and the times he was at home were like honeymoons. "But," she went on, with that amazing frankness which was so new and strange to me, "I'm fond of men; I like being with them much more than with women; I want them and I can't get on happily without them; when Frank's at home I don't want any other man; I like him better than anyone else I've met and for quite a time after he's gone I don't want anyone else; but presently the desire for a man's company gets hold of me; I want a man and I want him badly; and so I go out and find one; but he's got to be someone I like and like a lot; oh, I know as soon as I see him; I knew as soon as you came in and sat down and I meant to have you if I could; d'you like me?"

"Very much!" I replied and laughed. I turned a compliment or two over in my mind but did not voice them. They seemed hopelessly out of place.

"What are you laughing about?" she asked gaily.

"I really don't know; it seems all a bit queer, you know. Half an hour ago we hadn't met, didn't know each other

existed and now we're talking all sorts of intimate things and are going to sleep together to-night; we are, aren't we?"

"Of course we are; you're sure you like me very much? Because it'll be horrid if you don't; if you're just sleeping with me like a street-girl. It's not just that, is it? Because I really do like you very much."

"I like you immensely," I replied; "I'm looking forward to a tremendously fine time; I can't think of anything I want more."

"You're married, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Over ten years. I've two children."

"Are you still in love with your wife?"

"No; nor she with me. We don't live together; I mean we don't cohabit."

"Truly? I mean you're not just telling me that because you think it'd be a rotten thing for you to do if you loved your wife."

"Good Lord, no! it's true enough." And then I added, "But I don't think if I loved my wife I'd do it; but I don't know; I hope not."

"Why?"

"Well," I hesitated and then blurted out, "—er—it seems a bit low-down, don't you think?"

"So you think I'm not in love with my husband?" she asked chaffingly, "or else I'm playing a low-down trick on him; well?"

"I—er—suppose so; more or less."

"But I *do* love him!" with a triumphant little laugh, "and he loves me; but I don't suppose I'm the only woman he has; well, what're you frowning at now?"

"Oh, I don't know!" shrugging my shoulders. "'Fraid I'm a bit at sea. Let's talk of something else or I shall begin to think I'm a callow boy who knows nothing about anything. Shall we go to a show? Anything good you're keen on seeing?"

"We'll look through the paper prescntly. But first where are we going to stay to-night?" I must have looked a little surprised for she smiled and went on, "You didn't think you could come to my place, did you?"

"I hadn't really thought about it; just taking things for granted; I'm staying at *The Orchard*, but I'm there in my own name and I don't think it——"

"Of course it wouldn't. We'll go somewhere else; the other side of London; but I must be home by Sunday evening; perhaps I'll be able to see you again at the week-end; only perhaps; but after that I can't say at all; Frank'll be home at the end of the month."

That night and the next we slept together at a small hotel at Nottinghill Gate, and we also slept there the following Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. After that we parted. I never saw her again. We never knew each other's names; I was simply Dick and she Connie. It began and ended all in a week: why then bother to chronicle a mere commonplace incident, a sordid incident? No; there was nothing sordid about it at all. Certainly I was not in love with her; I might have thought I was had I not loved Barbara; but there was nothing like that about it; nothing at all; it was not in the same emotional category. But for all that it was a very happy and most completely enjoyed experience; delightful in every way. She was a pleasant and congenial companion during the day time, and she certainly made our nights together memorable; perhaps lovers like poets are born; if so she was a born lover, or should I say love-maker? Our association was then an intensely enjoyed brief friendship; it may seem an odd use of the word friendship; but what else can it be called? Such an association is surely friendship, the dearer and warmer because of its intimate side; I am inclined to think that all friendships between men and women would be the better for such closeness. That's as may be, but decidedly that week was one of the happiest of my life and merely in terms of physical well-being meant a great deal to me; I returned to Boughton feel-

ing better in health, freer and lighter in mind and spirit than I had done for a very long while. But over and above all this, and here is the significant factor in the incident, I not only now realised for the first time that my enforced celibacy was an unnecessary hardship but that it might be mitigated in very pleasant ways and without any of that expense of spirit and waste of shame which is, according to Shakespeare, the harvest of lust in action. On the contrary I felt refreshed and exhilarated as if from a cold bath and my sole reaction to the experience was that it had been a very charming and delightful one and one I should be glad to repeat. And, anyhow, why lust? that is the silliest of misnomers; it was, I repeat, a very happy and delightful brief friendship between a man and a woman; and just because we were man and woman there was made possible that warm intimacy which rendered it so deliciously memorable.

I returned to Boughton on the Monday, exactly three weeks after I had left, and found Uncle Fred poring over plans for greenhouses. We had already talked about these so that we might be less at the mercy of the weather; that first summer had been dry and hot, one of the wells had given out and we had lost many of our flowers; a bad winter would be even more disastrous; hence the greenhouses. This short chronicle of our early years at Boughton will be, I'm afraid, rather desultory and patchy, dodging about in time, going back to mention suddenly recollected events, telescoping the events of several years into a paragraph or covering several pages with the happenings of an hour; but this is unavoidable in a story which is dependent upon my memory alone and which is put down with the rapidity of this one; I rush along in an endeavour to miss nothing salient or significant, to try to be fair to everyone, to myself not least; I do not want to consider, to cogitate, to make notes and tabulate trivia; I am a man beset and haunted and only by this headlong transcription can I save myself from my thoughts; that must

be understood and all allowances made; I stand in utmost need of allowances, in dire need of human charity.

I came back to Boughton, as I have said, to find greenhouses the topic of the moment. Uncle Fred had already obtained estimates for a block of four, covering a total area or over five hundred square yards; these estimates startled me, to whom greenhouses simply meant a small back garden erection costing as far as I knew a few pounds; the lowest of the three estimates Uncle Fred was considering was £610 and the others were £650 and £720. He smiled at my exclamation; "That, of course, includes everything," he explained; "boilers, pipes and the whole caboodle." He grimaced and added, "they say there's no fool like a young man spending money on his love but how about an old man spending it on *his*, to wit flowers and the rest of it. Consider the lilies how they grow, Richard; they toil not neither do they spin; but they seem to cost the dickens of a lot nevertheless. However, it can't be helped. It's greenhouse or workhouse!" he chuckled. And he began explaining the plans for, I imagined, the hundredth time. In the end he characteristically plumped for the dearest, although it seemed to me no better than the others; and the rest of us agreed; it was difficult to do anything else considering it was his own money.

These houses were not ready till the end of September and we wanted them to earn money as soon as possible; it was too late for tomatoes, we'd no stock of chrysanthemums and so we decided for bulbs; tulips and daffodils chiefly. Even for these it was late. We knew there was a good market immediately after Christmas for lettuce and so we added these as an additional winter crop.

I may as well mention here that our first year's work showed a deficit, when all expenses, including domestic ones, were paid, of over seven hundred pounds.

That first bulb and lettuce crop failed completely. By January it was clear that something was wrong and we re-

luctantly called in an expert from Dutton's at Yeovil to locate the trouble. It took him barely five minutes and for the first time in my life I felt something akin to admiration for an expert. "Too much heat and too much moisture," he said laconically; "let me see your daily temperature charts."

Of course we'd never kept one but my uncle rose to the occasion. "Destroyed them, I'm afraid," he said, rubbing his nose thoughtfully; "at least I fancy so; d'you remember what we did with them, Richard?"

I shook my head and coolly stared down the half-amused glance of the expert, who turned away, saying, "Well, it doesn't matter; it's too late now; you'll lose the lot. I can't do anything more in here but probably I can help if you tell me exactly what your procedure has been. If you remember it," he added with a mildly malicious smile.

We learned a lot from him in the next half-hour and when he left after tea with his five guineas fee and expenses in his pocket we reckoned it money well spent and we did in fact the following year make a considerable profit from our tomatoes and chrysanthemums; by May we were sending consignments to half a dozen of the large towns within a fifty mile radius and the markets kept up amazingly until big supplies began to arrive from the south coast and Channel Islands when prices fell away rapidly. We were of course prepared for this and were ready to compete; but early in June our tomatoes developed a fungoid disease; *cladisporium*, I believe Uncle Fred called it; but anyhow it was very similar to potato blight and finished our crop for the year.

Later we were to fight against fly, wilt, leaf curl, mosaic, wire worm and various other abominations which afflict tomatoes and most of which could more fairly be classified as acts of God rather than be ascribed to our amateurishness.

We had the usual struggle with such curses as green fly, mildew and streak with our sweet peas, and black fly and mildew with our chrysanthemums; at one time or another our bulbs developed basal and black rot and were attacked

by eel worms; and our lettuce crops had to put up a not always successful fight against slugs, mildew and green fly.

This seems a fitting place to mention the Carner Insecticide, although it was not invented till the end of our third year at Boughton and was not manufactured on any large scale till some time later. The credit for it was mine and since so little stands to my credit in those first years of hard and mostly unremunerative labour I am glad to remember it.

I had noticed that a very persistent weed known locally as fliggerty was quite immune to the attacks of aphides, caterpillars and the rest of the insect pest. Oddly enough Uncle Fred was familiar with fliggerty as a herb (I've forgotten its name); he told me it was much valued by the old herbalists as a specific for chest complaints and still figured as quite an important item in the pharmacopœia. Be that as it may this was an instance of ignorance jumping to a possibility overlooked by knowledge, for Uncle Fred admitted, when I explained my hypothesis, that it had never occurred to him and he added that it certainly sounded watertight but, as was the way of promising hypotheses, it probably wouldn't work; but for once in a way the expert (for as far as herbs went Uncle Fred was decidedly that) was to be confounded and the ignoramus exalted. Briefly my hypothesis was that fliggerty obviously contained something in root, sap or leaves rendering it obnoxious to insects and it seemed reasonable to suppose that if a concoction were made from it that obnoxious principle, if its potency were retained, would make the liquid a powerful insecticide. *If its potency were retained* was, of course, the core of the matter. It was. I made about a gallon and used it against green fly on the arum lilies with amazing success. I then handed a supply over to Rendle without telling him anything about it; he cleared the cabbages of caterpillars, swore he'd never handled anything like it and asked what it was.

Who Rendle was necessitates a jump back of a year. The

end of our second year we still showed a deficit of several hundred pounds and Uncle Fred called one of the family councils of which he was so fond. We debated the whole matter for several hours and finally, much against the grain as it went, we decided to engage a working manager. And a few months later John Rendle, with the highest credentials from Dutton's, came to us and took charge. He was a middle-aged bachelor, tall, heavily built, dark and clean-shaven; in disposition he was taciturn, to the point of sulkiness if things were going at all awry; as a man I never liked him; we were never at any time on a footing of any sort of friendship and there was in the end to be bitter animosity between us. But he undoubtedly knew his job; our prosperity began with his coming and if that very valuable sideline the Carner Insecticide owed nothing to him directly it did indirectly, for I imagine that if we had not decided to employ a working manager the business would have collapsed before the end of its third year.

It may be as well to clear up the subject of the Carner Insecticide now. Its initial success was followed by equally great ones when it was used on a larger scale and presently I was making both a powder and a liquid for our own use. There arose then the question of manufacturing on a big scale and marketing it. Uncle Fred at once thought of Nichols who had been his chemist-assistant for seven years at Angel Lane, wrote to him and, in his own phrase, collared him for the firm. In little more than a year from the making of my first trial gallon we had laid down plant and Nichols and two men and three girls were producing, packing and despatching all over the country fifteen hundred gallons of the liquid and twelve hundredweight of the powder a week. Later the profits from the insecticide were so large as to threaten to absorb the other interests of the business, and this caused trouble with Rendle; for while Nichols was on a salary of five hundred a year Rendle received three hundred plus ten per cent. of the net profits on the nursery side. We even-

tually sold the insecticide outright to Riley's the St. Helen's people, for twelve thousand pounds. I've forgotten what happened to Nichols. I know he left us, entirely by his own choice, and received from my uncle a very handsome cheque as a parting gift.

The War came during our third year at Boughton; but since I obtained exemption and it did not touch any of us at all closely it has no place in this story and will not be mentioned again. Rendle was also exempted and Nichols physically unfit. We lost some of our hands but in the main, as I say, the war scarcely affected us.

And while The Nurseries had been stumbling from one initial mistake into another, threatening to collapse and finding at last steady legs in the person of saturnine John Rendle our domestic life went on, now as a sort of lighter background to our activities, now pushing itself into the forefront with such matters as sickness or a pleasure jaunt or some school triumph of Alister.

When we came to Boughton I was thirty-five, May thirty-nine, Alister five months over eight, and Tessa seven. Alister at the National School at Storhaven had made such great progress, as I have already told, that when we left he was already in standard three. The Boughton school was a small affair, accommodating only about fifty children and with a staff of three, Mr. Albert Snape and his wife and a young woman, Miss Grace Pelsey. Alister and Tessa began school there the week after we arrived, May taking them along to see the head master; and when they came home at midday after the first morning I noticed that Alister seemed very quiet and asked him what was wrong. "I've been put in Standard One, Father," he said; "it's silly, isn't it, when I ought to be in Three."

"Silly! Good Lord!" I said angrily; "I should think it is; the man must be a dolt, May."

"Ha! the village idiot!" chuckled Uncle Fred; "we'll have to see into this."

"I'll come along with you this afternoon," I said to Alister, "and we'll put things right."

I was prepared for a row with Snape, but it was impossible to quarrel with him. He was reason itself. "It's a mere formality putting him into Standard One," he explained; "that's the class for a boy of his age, and until we find out what he can do he must remain there; we can't, you know, work on hearsay, and parents are inclined to be partial." He smiled very amicably at me through his pince-nez; he was a short, fat man with iron-grey hair and a close-cut beard, and with his soft pleasant voice and agreeable manner he struck me as being a considerable improvement upon Packe of Storhaven. "Your little boy's a bit upset, eh?" he went on. "Of course; well, he needn't worry himself; if he can do Standard Three work he'll certainly go there and in double quick time; I shall be only too glad to promote him."

He was as good as his word, and by Christmas Alister had been in his rightful class nearly a month and must have surprised the good Snape by coming out top in the end-of-the-term examination. It is true that there were only about a dozen boys and girls in the class and that the standard of education at Boughton was evidently lower than that at Storhaven, but the feat was, nevertheless, pretty remarkable, although it was nothing to Alister's achievements later. I rather imagine that what hurt Alister most when he found himself put into Standard One was the fact that Tessa was also put there, and that Mrs. Snape, thinking that at first they'd prefer to be near each other, put them side by side into the same desk. To Alister this must have been a humiliating moment, for he was streets ahead of Tessa, who, in fact, had shown no signs of his brilliance; it does, I think, speak well for him that he did not mention his mortification; and even better, perhaps, for Tessa that she refrained from what would have been a pardonable song of triumph; the two children

were indeed the best of friends; their association had always been one that at times threatened to leave out sturdy little Paul, and after his death they seemed to draw the closer together. Tessa would gladly have shut me out, but the bond between Alister and me was too strong for her and grew always stronger; and while I had sometimes suffered misgivings that, as Alister grew older and made friends, some such thing might happen, I soon realised it was a groundless fear and was able to lay that ghost with a considerable measure of finality.

Few men can have made so close and constant a companion of a child as I had done with Alister, and even when we were working such long and fatiguing hours during the early years at Boughton I never allowed the work to interfere with the hours we devoted to each other. These were not only hours of playing, hours of trips to Barneford or Felcombe, hours of country walks and rambles, but they were hours, too, of study, chiefly reading and writing. And before Alister was eleven I found myself forced to rub up forgotten knowledge and to re-read old books and skip through new ones in order to keep pace with him and to answer his questions.

Barneford Grammar School was one of the oldest and most famous Grammar Schools in the country, and its ten annual scholarships, each of £70 a year for six years, were regarded as the educational plums for Devon boys—they were only open to boys resident in the county. The boys had to be over eleven and under thirteen at the time of the examination, which was held in June; and on Alister's eleventh birthday I sought an interview with Mr. Snape. Alister was by then top boy in the little Boughton school and it was therefore high time he set out to conquer larger worlds. I was not bothering about the financial side of the scholarship, for the business was then just beginning to turn the long corner and I was, moreover, already experimenting with fliggerty and dreaming dreams of vast profits; my intention was then, in any case, to send Alister to Barneford Grammar School after the summer

holidays, but it seemed to me that the honour of winning one of these coveted scholarships would be a cachet worth having. That Alister was cock of Boughton School, I knew, meant nothing; he would have to compete with some three-hundred-odd youngsters, the pick of Devonshire; but allowing for my bias, I was convinced that his attainments were altogether remarkable for his age, and I was quite unable to imagine that there was another boy in the county able to beat him—certainly no boy of eleven; but I thought it as well to sound Snape. I expected to find him adopt the traditional vague non-committal attitude of schoolmasters in such circumstances, but I was to experience an agreeable surprise; even in my ears his praises of Alister sounded generous to the point of lavishness.

"Your son, Mr. Carden," he said, "is far and away the most remarkable boy I have had as a scholar; it is not merely that in actual scholastic attainment he is a long way ahead of other boys of his age, but his mind shows a maturity which is—er—well, to me, certainly—er—unprecedented." I smiled to myself at this; I was so familiar with the calibre of Alister's mind that Snape's remark seemed a commonplace; but I made no comment, contenting myself with saying, "You think, then, he will stand a chance of winning one of the Barneford scholarships? this year, I mean?"

Mr. Snape combed his trim beard with his plump brown fingers. He smiled with expansive amiability. "If there are six boys in Devon, Mr. Carden," he said, slowly, "who can beat your son, then Devon is—er—er—a—hotbed of young prodigies."

And so Alister sat for the examination in June. I almost wish in a way that I had to chronicle, not that he failed to obtain one of the scholarships, but that he was at least beaten by several of his fellow-competitors, for I realise only too well how much like a romantic tale his story is becoming; but I cannot help that! the incontestable facts were that Alister's name headed the list; that the examining body added a note

to the effect that his papers were " very remarkable indeed for a boy. of his age "; that in the two papers on English Language, Literature and Composition, he obtained a total of 287 marks out of the possible 300, which was not only a record, but won him the Gates-Elsworthy Exhibition with £50 a year for four years and only twice previously won since its founding in 1891. Alister, then, at the age of eleven and at his first trial of strength with his contemporaries, had won not only honours but money prizes to the total value of over £600. The list was published on July the tenth. It was a great day for Alister and for me! its triumph swept over me almost unbearably; something of that overwhelming surge of emotion comes over me now as I write; heady as it was it was the one clear unadulterated draught of triumph I was to drink, because it seemed to me that I shared it with him alone; never again in any of his triumphs was I able to feel that it was he and I and no one else; others crept in; others intruded; near and dear as we were to remain, I had to share him with others; more and more I had to share him as the horizon of his life widened until it seemed that I was sharing him with half the world. How it warms my heart now to remember that when we opened the letter announcing his success and I gripped his hands, he released them quickly and flung his arms about my neck and kissed me again and again and then said softly, " I'm glad for you, Father; I'm so glad for you." Were those the words of an ordinary boy of eleven? Was it not a rare spirit which could inspire them? A spirit apart; Alister, my boy, my dear son, my high hope.

That first triumph of Alister's seemed, even at the time, a landmark in his life; but looking back now on it it is clear that it was the end of a phase, of a stage; all the loose ends of our life together were gathered up; our years and days were rounded off; the first portion of the fabric we were building was finished and put away and a new one begun.

I had gone to Allardye's School on a scholarship, and I

had always imagined that the scholarship boys there were treated differently from the paying scholars; that they were on another footing and that not only the staff but the other boys regarded them patronisingly. I was probably wrong, but this was the impression I had and it remained; I therefore decided that Alister should not take up either his scholarship or his exhibition but should go as a paying scholar; the fees were high, but I counted upon an increase in the prosperity of our business to render that negligible. I therefore wrote to this effect to the head master (the High Master he was called), Dr. Crawford, and he replied asking me to come and see him.

He was a scholarly-looking man, youthful in appearance despite his grey hair and a slight stoop, and there was a grave but kindly austerity in his expression which was singularly engaging; his voice was deep and pleasant in tone and his handshake firm and steady; altogether a fine type and I had not been in his study two minutes with him before I understood something of the secret of his school's high repute in the country. I had gone with the intention simply of reiterating my decision, without giving any reason; but such was his personality that I presently found myself launched upon a recital of my probably mistaken grievances as a scholarship boy at Allardyce's. He heard me out and then, with a smile, he said, "I don't know if my assurance, Mr. Carden, that nothing like that is possible here will have any weight with you, but I can certainly give it; in fact, I am not exaggerating when I say that the School generally and individually holds in high esteem the boys who win scholarships here; and it is only reasonable that we should, since in the past many of the honours won for the school have been gained by such boys."

I nodded, but was by no means moved from my purpose. "It is not altogether that," I explained; "but, well, frankly, I *want* to pay for him."

"I quite understand that," he smiled, "what does your son think about it?"

"He thinks as I do."

"Are you sure?" And then he laughed softly. "I really hope not. Come now, let us compromise. Let him come here as a fee-paying scholar but take up the Gates-Elsworthy Exhibition. In fact, really, I don't see how we're going to prevent him taking that up by the terms of its foundation; it's almost an automatic honour and falls upon any boy clever enough to gain over eighty-five per cent of the total marks in the English Language, Literature and Composition papers; the question of refusal has never before arisen, and since your son is the first boy in the records of the scholarship to obtain over ninety per cent. it would be, I think, a pity and a mistake not to allow him to take advantage of it."

And as this seemed a pleasant enough way out I accepted it.

And so, his laurels fresh upon him, Alister began his schooling at Barneford on September the twcnty-fisth. He had to go by train and was very proud of his first season-ticket. But that he wore those laurels lightly is best evidenced by the fact that his chief excitement in the whole business was that the 8.30 morning train had to be flagged for him at Boughton Halt.

It is fitting that this phase should close with a portrait of him. He was tall, slim and handsome, with an olive skin, thick black hair and large hazel eyes. Whence came his beauty I do not know; certainly not from me, a gaunt camel of a man; nor from his mother; he was quite unlike either of us; did it come from that dream of mine or is that too grotesque a fancy? It does not matter; there he was, a fine handsome youngster to take the eye and stir the heart. As for his health, he had never had a day's real illness; had escaped all those childish maladies falsely considered inevitable—measles, whooping-cough, mumps, scarlet-fever and the rest of the major and minor ills resulting from an unwise diet.

It is a simple enough matter to portray his body; can I give the slightest picture of his mind? A difficult task; I could give a list of the books he had read and studied (and a long

and remarkable list it would be); I could detail his school successes; show him to you at work and at play; but how little that would help; nor am I presumptuous enough to pretend that I knew his mind; something of it, surely, I knew (more, far more, than anyone else); the fringes and the shallows; but the centre, the heart and the deep waters, what of them? A glimpse now and again; a sudden sense of fleeting, intimate contact at times; no more than that; and yet how much that was, how rich a possession then and now.

Let me then try to show something of his mind as he showed it to me in countless questions spread over three or four years, most of them between his eighth and tenth years; for already by the time he went to Barneford School he was bringing fewer and fewer questions to me; it was no unwillingness on my part to answer that was stemming the spate but sheer incapacity; he was already outdistancing me and into the bargain he had learnt to go to books of reference, and I had added to my library for his benefit such books as Webster's Dictionary, Brewster's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, Everyman's Encyclopædia, a world atlas and gazetteer, Palgrave's Golden Treasury, Cruden's Concordance and a biographical dictionary of English Literature.

As I have already done before in this chronicle, I telescope a hundred conversations into this single one. I observe no chronological order; that would be impossible; I jot them down as they come slipping back into my memory or as, with no small pains, I dredge them up.

" Didn't you ever go to church, Father?"

(My non-attendance at church was a continual source of interest and inquisitiveness to Alister and he frequently referred to it. May was a regular church-goer, and after early disputes at Storhaven about the children going I had given way, only stipulating that there should be no compulsion. While disliking the idea of Alister going, I reckoned on our talks and his own reading later on to adjust the balance.)

" Yes, you know that; I've told you so scores of times."

"Did your father go?"

"No."

"Not ever?"

"I expect he did when he was young. I never asked him, or if I did I've forgotten it now."

"Grandfather goes."

"Yes, why shouldn't he? People please themselves about such things. I don't go because I dislike it and I think I can use my spare time in better ways; more enjoyable ways, anyhow."

"I don't like going much. Why do some people believe in God and some don't?"

"Why do some people eat meat and some don't?"

"Is meat bad for you?"

"Not for me; anyhow, I like it."

"Grandfather and Grannie don't eat meat."

"They please themselves. Your mother didn't eat meat till long after she was married. And you and Tessa don't eat it either."

"I've tasted it. I like it."

"I dare say."

"Grandfather said only cannibals eat meat and it's poison."

"He was joking. I don't think it matters much what you eat as long as you like it, and are working hard and getting plenty of exercise."

"I get plenty of exercise and so does Grandfather."

"Yes, I dare say; but your mother thinks meat bad for children and I dare say she's right. When you're older you can please yourself as I do. Eat and drink what you like."

"Shall I drink beer?"

"If you like."

"I shall like. I *have* drunk it."

"When?"

"You left some in your glass and I drank it up."

"No heel-taps, eh? You'd better not do it again; beer's bad for boys."

"Isn't it bad for men?"

"Oh, I dare say; if they drink too much; I drink too much sometimes."

"Why didn't mother have more than three babies?"

"She thought three were enough."

"But when Paul died there were only two. Why didn't we have another one then?"

"Your mother didn't want any more."

"Don't you have babies if you don't want them?"

"No."

"Why did Jane Stokes cry when her baby was born?"

(Jane Stokes was the daughter of one of our labourers and had had a bastard.)

"Who said she cried?"

"Tessa and I saw her."

"Well, you see, she wasn't married and so she had no husband to earn money to keep the baby, and that's why she cried, I expect."

"She shouldn't have had the baby if she hadn't a husband to buy it food."

"No."

"Why did she?"

"Why did Tessa pull the cat's tail when Mother told her it would scratch her if she did?"

"She was silly."

"That's it; we're all silly at times and do things like that; that's what Janes Stokes did and so she cried, like Tessa did."

"Her father beat her."

"Did he?"

"Yes. I heard him tell George Gammon. He said, 'I said to her, I said, you dirty slut, I said, haven't I got enough mouths to feed, have I? I said.' "

"And where were you when you heard all that? Not eavesdropping, I hope."

"I wasn't, Father. He shouted it out in the small tomato-

house and George Gammon was working outside and I was weeding."

"Well, that's his own business. I shouldn't bother about it; you've enough to do to look after your own."

(He had been reading Shelley.) "What does this mean, Father? 'Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, stains the white radiance of eternity'?"

"I'm not altogether sure I know."

"You don't know?"

"Poets don't always know themselves what they meant; I mean years after they've written something. But what d'you think it means?"

"I can't understand it; I know what a dome is and I know eternity is living for ever; but it means more than that, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Shelley didn't think much of life, you know."

"Do you mean he didn't like being alive?"

"Not exactly; but he thought that the universe, the sky and the stars and so on, was a lovely thing, but that it was spoiled by man, by man's evil deeds, I suppose. You know that hymn you asked me about some time ago: where every prospect pleases and only man is vile. Well, Shelley at times had something of that sort of bee in his bonnet."

"It's not true then?"

"I wouldn't say that. Shelley thought it true; or he did at times; I dare say most people do at times. But it's not much use asking people what a poet means by his poems; you must puzzle it out for yourself."

"But you must ask sometimes."

"I dare say; but the less the better now you're growing up; you've got plenty of books you can go to; that's much better than asking."

"Because you remember it better; is that why?"

"Yes; and because it's often just dam' laziness that makes children ask so many questions. As a matter of fact, you know as much about most things as I do now; more about some."

"More! What things?"

"Well, your own thoughts, for example. No one knows as much about yourself as you do and no one knows what you're thinking unless you tell them."

"You do sometimes."

"Yes; now and then; but it's mostly when we've just been talking about something and then our thoughts run along the same channels, as we say. But at times it does seem as if we can read people's thoughts. When you were very young you often surprised your mother and me by asking questions about something we were thinking. I dare say it was only a coincidence. But there was one instance—but you know all about that; I've told you dozens of times."

"About your high hope?"

"Yes."

"Say all of it."

"You know it yourself; it was one of the first things we put in our anthology."

"I know, but I like you to say it."

"*Philip, his father, laid here the twelve-years-old child, his high hope, Nicoteles.*"

"Is that your favourite?"

"Perhaps; it's one of them, anyhow."

"I think I like best :

*Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie:
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.
This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he long'd to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

"I told Mr. Snape I liked it best and he said, 'It's a queer poem for a boy to like.'"

"I dare say he expected you to like 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star,' or 'What does little birdie say?' or some such twaddle."

"Why do people go to war?"

"Why do boys fight?"

"I haven't had a fight for a long while now; more than a year."

"You're growing out of it; it's a silly way of settling a quarrel anyhow."

"Why is it?"

"Well, if you quarrel with a boy and fight him and beat him, what does that prove?"

"I can beat him."

"That's it. But it doesn't prove you were right."

"About the quarrel?"

"Yes."

"And wars are the same?"

"Yes. You know what Napoleon said."

"Do I? What was it? About God?"

"Yes; go on: God what?"

"Fights on the side of the big battalions."

"That's right; and that's all war is and all the rest is lies and clap-trap."

"Sometimes the smaller side wins. The Spartans only had three hundred soldiers and they beat thousands of Medes and Persians at The Gate of The Hot Springs."

"Only for a time; the Spartans were slaughtered to a man in the end; it's always like that; in the long run might will beat right, if it's left to war to settle it."

"How can you settle a quarrel if you don't fight?"

"Well, you can talk it over."

"But then you quarrel again and start fighting."

"All right; call in an arbiter, then. A sort of referee. But I'm afraid that won't get you far. People will always quarrel."

"And always fight; so there'll always be war."

"Unless people say : we don't mind a bit of an argument but we draw the line at war; it's too damned uncomfortable; sounds a bit twaddly, doesn't it? Let's dry up about war."

And there perhaps I had better leave an attempt to do the impossible. It is, I admit, no picture at all. Whether or not, if I had taken notes of all our talks, I could have made a picture of his mind it is impossible to say and futile to speculate about; I failed to do so, and there is no more to be said. Or at least no more than this (and it is a thing I have mentioned before) : in the matter of remembered conversation my memory rarely plays me false.

CHAPTER XII

DIANA SEARELLE

ALISTER's new life at Barnesford Grammar School and the time he now necessarily spent away from home (he had his midday meal at school) was soon to have, or so it began to seem to me, a loosening effect upon the tie binding us together; it was not only that he spent so comparatively little time at home, but he was quick to make friends there, to visit them at their homes and to ask them in return to his own. That this was inevitable I knew; that it was perfectly right I also knew; and yet this preoccupation of his with things outside my knowledge and with people I did not know and his own ever-widening life and new interests from which I was largely shut out did, in some subtly insidious way, begin to breed in me a sort of spiritual sickness. I could reason the thing out and see what a fool I was and how unjust I was being to him, and yet, reason as I might, there remained an illogical sort of resentment, not against him, not indeed against his new friends, but rather against life which was responsible for his growth. And yet again in some moods I rejoiced at the evidences of his popularity, was glad of the circle of friends he was making and of those very successes at school and in social intercourse which were widening that circle. But the balance in general swayed against the sane view and had a steady bias towards that sentiment which differed little from a primitive sort of possessive jealousy. But I must claim at least some grounds for my folly. It was patent enough, daylight clear to my jealous eyes, when Alister brought his friends home that they had interests I did not share, could not share, was not asked to share, and I became

for the first time hurtfully aware of the unbridgeable gap between the generations. By this time the business had very definitely turned the corner and was heading steadily for prosperity, and our domestic circumstances were such that Alister had no need to be ashamed of the house or table to which he brought his friends. That I could be at one and the same time glad of this, yet sorry that his friends came so often, is the measure of my folly in the matter.

And so, as a sort of anodyne, I suppose, I too began to seek other interests. I joined the Fenton Golf Club, where I spent more time in the bar than on the links, and I began to drive frequently of an evening into Barneford and Felcombe, where I soon made friends and drinking cronies. For over four years I had been very abstemious, drinking only with my meals, with the addition of perhaps a bottle or two of light beer before going to bed. I often said, more or less jocularly, during that time that I was losing the taste for liquor and it wouldn't bother me to do without it altogether. But in the pleasant sociable atmosphere of the Fenton Club bar and the hard-drinking saloons of Barneford and Felcombe, I was soon holding my own with the best, or worst, and was changing over from beer to spirits. This change-over was to some extent due to the abominable war-time beers then being brewed, but all responsibility cannot be charged to that account; I had turned, I am quite sure, to drink as an anodyne, and whisky was a quicker and more effective one than beer, even such beer as Harry Bender had brewed at *The Lord Nelson* in the Storhaven days.

But with all my excessive drinking at the Fenton Club, with its effect upon my work, my nerves and my general health, I still put my membership on the credit account in the balance of my life; I owed to it my friendship with Dr. Philip Aston; that in itself was something; but I owed indirectly to Aston an experience rich in an almost tumultuous happiness. Aston's boy Arthur was also at Barneford School, and although he was nearly two years older than Alister they had struck up

a friendship. By the time Alister was fourteen they were very close friends and in the same form; this is no measure of young Aston's attainments since by then most of the boys in Alister's form were nearly two years his senior.

For some considerable time after my joining Fenton Club I was on little more than nodding terms with Aston, although I had played an odd round or two with him; this was chiefly due to the fact that Aston hardly drank at all and spent little time in the bar; if pressed he would come in, have a glass, return the courtesy and then hurry off on the plea of professional duties; he would never join a party at the bar, and for a reason he quite frankly stated: that it made unavoidable his drinking more than a doctor should, and especially one who drove his own car. When I pointed out that I drove mine, and all the better when I was moderately soused, he said bluntly, "That's your affair, Carden; but as for driving all the better, that's sheer bunkum; you drive with what you no doubt call more abandon, but which is, in fact, with less caution, and while at present there is plenty of margin of safety on Devon roads, on most roads in England, probably, there won't be in ten years' time, in five years."

"I'll cut it out when that time arrives," I laughed.

"Which?"

"Oh, driving; you wouldn't have me cut out drinking?"

He smiled. "As a hard-working G.P. with three children to put into the world I wouldn't have anybody cut it out," he said; "but if I were giving a friend advice——"

"Don't," I interrupted. "D'you know we couldn't finance this war if it weren't for the liquor revenue?"

"Rot! D'you know, Carden, I've more than half a notion that if fermented liquors had never been invented war would have died out with paleolithic man."

"And I've a *whole* notion that if booze had never been invented mankind would have died out, and glad to do it."

It was really through Uncle Fred that Aston and I became on more intimate terms. Tea was just finished at The Nur-

series one evening in early August and we were sitting in the garden talking over the plans for the winter crops with Rendle, who had just strolled up. Rendle was leaning over the back of a basket-work arm-chair, I was stretched out in a deck-chair and Uncle Fred was sitting on a camp-stool which he was in the habit of carrying round with him. He was smiling and leaning forward to emphasise a point when he suddenly gave a loud cry, flung up both arms and capsized. We both jumped to his assistance but he picked himself up quickly enough, righted his stool and sat down again. He was still smiling, but I thought he looked a trifle shaky and there was a queer pallor about his mouth. "Most extraordinary thing, Richard," he explained; "I thought someone had lifted me into the air and for a moment everything vanished behind a black curtain, even myself, except just for the top of my head; the oddest sensation I've ever experienced; must have been a touch of the sun; I'm all right now; just a bit dizzy; go on, Rendle; well, yes, I think I *will* have a chair—er—in case; acrobatics are a bit risky at my age."

I talked this odd seizure, or whatever it was, over with May that night, and she agreed with me it would be as well if we asked Aston to look in in the morning without saying anything to her father, who would certainly refuse to see him as a doctor; he'd even less faith in doctors than I had and would, we very well knew, consider it beneath him as a herbalist to consult a drug-merchant, which was one of his pet phrases. The only way to get over the difficulty was for me to see Aston early in the morning and invite him over to luncheon and see if the conversation couldn't be steered to Uncle Fred's mishap and something in the nature of an examination made.

Aston readily agreed to come over, and it speaks well for his charm and tact that after a good deal of chaffing on both sides Uncle Fred submitted to quite a thorough overhaul. But the patient certainly had the tail of the laugh, for at the end of his examination Aston could say no more than, 'if

you'd been a heavy smoker I'd have said it was that and advised you to give it up altogether. As it is, I can't find anything wrong; you're remarkably fit for your age; perhaps," jocularly, "your diet's too low; what do you say if I prescribe an underdone rump steak daily?"

"I've no adequate vocabulary to deal with that suggestion," chuckled Uncle Fred. "I'm convinced it was the sun. So let's hear no more about it."

It was during luncheon that we began to talk of Barneford Grammar School, and Aston congratulated me upon Alister's brilliance, and with that as a very pleasant stepping-off place we soon began discussing things in general, and before the meal was over Aston and I had reached a footing of congeniality never before attained in our eight or nine months' acquaintanceship. That meal and that talk were, in fact, the starting-point of our friendship; that it never became a very close or very intimate one was, I admit, my own fault.

It could have been no more than a week, perhaps less, after this rather disturbing incident, that Aston and I, with Alister and young Arthur Aston, went to an otter hunt. After a seven o'clock breakfast Alister and I drove over to the other side of Fenton, where we picked up the Astons. Aston's practice was in Barneford; he was in partnership with Doctors Saysh and Wood, an arrangement which enabled each man to get a certain definite amount of leisure; it must also have been a profitable partnership, since all three were married men with several children attending by no means cheap schools, and they all ran comfortable establishments and kept a good table.

After meeting Aston we joined the Fenton and Boughton Hunts and the mob (for it was by now nothing less), being shortly augmented by the Hapton, Bagley and Felcombe Hunts, the sport began. I was, if anything, bored by the whole proceedings and have no intention of describing them; one otter hunt is, I imagine, much like another; years later I read Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter*, and anyone interested

in the sport may be referred to that fine story. My sole reason for mentioning our attendance at the hunt in question is its importance in my own life, if not in Alister's.

We had arranged that our small party of four should return to The Nurseries for luncheon, but the chase took us so far afield (the kill being near Coombe Ferry, over twelve miles from Boughton, and the time after one o'clock), that we decided to lunch at *The Royal George* there. There were some thirty-odd guests, mostly from the hunt, in the smallish room, and the noise of talking and laughing and the clatter of plates made conversation at first difficult. But later, jaws being busy with toughish cold beef, the worst of the uproar subsided and Aston and I and the boys began chatting about the events of the morning.

The hunt, as is the way of hunts, when the opportunity arises (the scent being lost for a while and everyone taking a breather), had made frequent calls for refreshment, and I had certainly not lacked for many long cool tankards of beer; so that by the time we sat down to our meal I was already slightly on the doubtful side of strict sobriety and the two pints of the old ale still being brewed in fortunate parts of the country swung the balance farther over; I was by no means drunk (beer had no longer that power over me), but I was sufficiently under the influence of drink to receive Alister's remark as a pointed one, despite my conviction, even as it struck home, that it was entirely innocent in intention and had no reference at all to me. But it went home like a knife-thrust to my heart, not of its own power, but because on Alister's lips it acquired for me a deadly and devastating potency; it left me for the first time in our association with a feeling of humiliation. It was in response to a question of Aston's asking him whether he'd enjoyed the morning's sport. "I've enjoyed the crowd and the noise and excitement," Alister replied; "or I did until I began to think it was rather a rotten sort of business, hundreds of people and a dozen hounds chivvying two or three otters to death; they hadn't a chance to get away."

"Hadn't a chance!" laughed Aston; "well, one did, anyhow, and if otters never got away, Alister, there'd be no object in notching the poles for a kill; a twenty-notch pole would be nothing to be proud of; as it is, well, ask Tom Gammon how much he wants for his pole. I should say the odds are ten to one they get away."

"Otters like it," said Arthur Aston; "it's all in the day's work to them; they're either chasing or being chased; it's their life."

"I don't believe that, Arthur," Alister laughed; "not about being chased; you might as well say a cad who kicks a dog likes being kicked himself. It's rot, isn't it, Father?"

"Sheer sophistry, Alister," laughed Dr. Aston.

I nodded. "But still," I said, "it doesn't do to imagine the otter feels as keenly about it as you do; there is something in what Arthur says; the otter has lived all its life in an environment where it's hunt and be hunted, kill or be killed, and whether it's a lone dog doing a bit of hunting on its own who's the pursuer or half the hunts in Devon I don't suppose it makes much difference to the otter. He stand pretty nearly as much chance of getting clear, and it gives half a day's fun and exercise in the open air to hundreds of people, and that's of more account than the life of an otter or two."

"I don't think the men of the hunts seemed to bother much about exercise, Father," Alister said with a smile; "they look more like a lot of red-faced public-house loungers than athletes, don't they, Arthur? I'd like to see them on the track with old Fulger, Topley and Cairns." (These were the school champions at the mile, half and quarter.)

There was a general laugh at this, in which I joined with difficulty, a difficulty that apparently passed unnoticed, for the light-hearted chatter and chaff continued between the four of us and I went on playing my part; but I was humiliated, mortified, sick at heart, for all my merriment; it had seemed to me that Alister's glance had flickered to my face as he uttered his derisory comment upon the huntsmen and, despite

my conviction that he had no such intention, despite all the reason and logic I could bring to bear upon the matter, I felt myself stand condemned in his eyes, a bitterer and more piercing condemnation than any other lips could offer me; in that moment I knew myself condemned and, worse still, contemned.

And in the anguish of that moment my glance went beyond Alister to the table opposite, was caught and held by a woman's and abruptly, incontinently, in a single instant of time, extravagantly exaggerated as that may sound, all other emotions were swept from my mind by desire, passion, lust—call it what you will.

I have sometimes been inclined to play with the notion that it was my feeling at that moment of bitter humiliation at Alister's hands which made me ripe for that incontinent surrender; but I know that is not true; a hundred reasons, a score of motives actuated that capitulation; but my humiliation was not one of them; I won't plead that; why should I? There is nothing to plead about. No; I surrendered to Diana Searelle without a struggle (a struggle! my God! I went to her arms in a headlong fury of eagerness!), because since that interlude with Connie in London over three years previously my sex-life had been nil; I was in that respect starved, famishing; but there is more than that in it; that starvation had bothered me hardly at all; it was under the surface, sleeping, sub-conscious; I had met socially many women without that hunger clambering up into my consciousness; it needed Diana Searelle to stir that sleeping sense into urgent, clamorous appetite; stir it? how inapt that is! she whipped with her beauty that sleeping sense so that it sprang up fanged and clawing like a beast of prey. Her beauty? well, I don't know; it seems a queer word to use about Diana Searelle; I never associated her with that word, although one of its Pentecostal tongues may well speak for her. Beauty? No. It went deeper than that, farther back, more primitive, her flesh calling imperiously to mine and mine to hers. Mine to

hers? Of course; that sort of call of the blood is no one-sided affair. Hazlitt and his Sarah Walker, you say; what of that affair? And I reply that there is no depth in a saucer or warm blood in a fish; that Hazlitt's lust was a thing that grew slowly and was rooted in an emotion remote from passion, tickled vanity or soothed humiliation, a flattered self-distrust, whichever you prefer. But Diana Searelle's and my passion for each other was immediate, instant, a thing entirely of the flesh and the hot blood; beauty, as I say, doesn't enter into it; nor my own looks. Hers was to me at once the most desired and desirable body in the world as mine was to her. So much for beauty! But she was comely enough by any standard; more than comely; of middle height, body and limbs richly moulded, heavy black hair, dark eyes, a dark, almost oriental skin, a red wide mouth; is that clear enough to make her seen? not that it matters; you can never see her as vividly as I did; no one in all her life had ever seen her as vividly as I or, I know, as vividly as she saw me; to show the intensity of that perception one would need a word combining the meaning of see, feel, probe, sound. Fantastic? I should have said so, too, before I met Diana Searelle. As for her age, I never knew it; something under thirty; something a good deal under thirty.

I managed an opportunity to talk to her before we set off for Boughton and learned her name and who she was and enough else to set my pulses leaping. She was the young wife of John Searelle, of Brock Farm, Hapton, about midway between Boughton and Barneford. Searelle was a man of sixty, and there was by his former wife a son, Mark, a young man of twenty-one, then at St. David's Agricultural College, Somerset. It seemed amazing to me that I had for four years lived within five miles of this enchanting woman and had never met her before; I was not even certain whether I had previously heard Searelle's name. In our minds, as we talked, desire already slaking its drouth anticipatedly, there was, I know, the same thought; four lost years. Well, we would

make up for them without delay. How, when and where could we meet again, and that immediately, was the sole problem that beset us; there was nothing else to solve, nothing else to consider; there could be no preliminaries in our tourney; such things were for philanderers; we knew what we wanted of each other without the urge of fondling and caresses; there remained then only to accomplish our will. "After dusk, say ten to-night, the old quarry, Darracot," I whispered urgently, as I gave her my hand, with a jostling, laughing crowd all about us. She nodded quickly with a look from her dark eyes and a slow smile on her sweet, seductive mouth that set my heart throbbing and parched my mouth with sudden lust.

I asked Rendle that afternoon about John Searelle, and he told me as much as he knew. Brock Farm was a fairish-sized one, about fifty acres all told, thirty under corn, and old Searelle was comfortably off. "Talks of retiring when his boy Mark leaves College," Rendle said; "which 'll be the end o' next year, I believe. He's a good sort, but led by the nose by a handsome young wife, or so they say; but what old man isn't if he's fool enough to take one to his bed? he's dam' lucky if he doesn't get a cuckoo's egg laid there; not that there's anything o' that about Mrs. Searelle, 's far as I know; but I reckon she married him for a soft time and she gets it; not that she's soft, by God! ride anything ever foaled and never misses a meet, otter, fox or deer."

But it wasn't Diana I wanted to hear about; I knew more than he did about her; already more than he or any other man would ever know; so I put in a question about the son.

"He's all right," Rendle replied; "a graft from the good old stock; his father's brains and twice his physique, and I reckon his mother was a fine-looking woman, for he must 've got his looks somewhere. Have good sport?"

"Not too bad; we got a dog of thirty-five pounds and a sizeable cub of four-and-twenty; but it's a bit like golf; a devil of a lot of chivvying for a very small result."

Unluckily, it rained torrentially that evening, beginning shortly after seven and at nine-thirty, when I set off for Darracot quarry, the rain was still tumbling down. But I had no doubt Diana would be there. She arrived in her small Peugeot, a few minutes after I got there. We left our cars by the roadside, as deserted a spot as could be desired, and pushed our way through soaked undergrowth to the comparative shelter of some trees, where we stood a long while clasped in each other's arms, our bodies strained close, our lips together. We were soon drenched from the incessant heavy dripping from the trees; I can still feel that rain running coldly down my face, neck and back, and the intoxicating thrill of her warm wet body in my arms. The same single thought held us both and the same decision came to us; this was no place to satisfy the passion that possessed us; it seemed to us that we had been waiting all our lives for our first embrace; it would be a clumsy folly to mar its full enjoyment by snatching at it now in this unpropitious moment when it seemed we had a hundred years before us; we were both, instinctively, perhaps, enough versed in the art of love to know how much the little things count in that first sweet coupling.

And so, clasped in each other's arms under the soaking trees, we talked and planned, our mouths so close that again and again as our lips moved in speech they touched and clung and we fell silent until for very breathlessness our kissing ended and we drew back our heads and laughed softly and went on with our whispered talk.

We needed to scheme and plan; for this was to be no brief matter, no scared hedgerow affair, no business of hurried rendezvous in odd corners; we would drink slowly and drink deep at our ease. It was then necessary that I should get to know and become on friendly terms with Searelle and that Diana should become a welcome visitor at The Nurseries. For the first stroke a weapon was already to hand; Searelle would be cutting his corn in a couple of days, was no doubt cursing the downpour as much as he was cursing the concatenation of

accidents which had robbed him of two of his five men at a time when extra labour was not to be had for money; one had slipped off his butty when the horse jerked forward and had broken a leg, and the second was in Barneford Hospital with a poisoned arm; the gods surely were playing our hands! I would drive over early the next morning, tell Searelle I'd heard in Boughton about his bad luck and offer him two of our own men for his reaping. For Diana's welcome at The Nurseries we would leave that also to the gods. And so we parted for the night and knew beyond all doubting that we had been wise in our patience.

I drove over to Brock Farm shortly after seven the next morning and introduced myself to Searelle. He looked nearer fifty than his sixty-three years; he was short, spare and wiry with a fresh complexion and thick iron-grey hair; his expression struck me at first as sombre, almost gloomy; but when presently during our talk he smiled it changed into one as engaging and attractive as I have ever seen upon any human being's face; that sombre cast, as I was soon to learn, was usual with him, but was due chiefly to a habit of introspection and not to any melancholy; he was indeed a happy man, healthy, hard-working, normal, and one of the pleasantest and most generous I have ever met; generous in spirit; the temper of his mind was fine, sympathetic, tolerant, understanding.

My offer of the loan for a week or more of two of our hands clearly took him by surprise, and his gratitude struck me as rather ludicrously incommensurate with the trifling service. He seemed to want to do me an immediate service in return and when he found I had not yet breakfasted he showed a childish delight in ordering a meal for me which would have sated a couple of famished schoolboys, but for which my morning stomach had small zest. I nevertheless managed to make sufficiently fair play with my knife and fork to satisfy his hospitality, and while I ate he and Diana and I chatted.

It was a blazing hot day, and Searelle said if the weather

held he would start cutting the next morning at dawn; the corn was already a fortnight late, and with his two men incapacitated and the weather looking so unpromising he had, he said, made up his mind to write off the corn as a loss; "But now," he went on, with that charming smile lighting up his face, "by your very great kindness, Mr. Carden—" and the laudation of my generosity threatened to break out again, so that I hastened to stem it with an inquiry about his apples.

"I've sold the trees as they stand," he said, "except four we're keeping for our own use. Picking 'll begin in a fortnight; they'll yield grand this year and Henneker's got a bargain, although he tried to beat me down a hundred; but I stood by my six hundred and fifty and Henneker 'll make a clear two-fifty; and well enough he knew it, the tight-fisted young shark."

"George Henneker's a nailer," laughed Diana.

Her husband nodded, pressed the tobacco ash down into the bowl of his pipe and pocketed it before replying, "He is, my dear; a tight-fisted old man's more or less natural, but a young one seems rather—er—well—a sort of sad affair; I like seeing boys generous, even if they're spending all the old man's money!" with a chuckle. "Offered me three-fifty at first, the dam' young Shylock; and watches his pickers like a weasel; doesn't sleep o' nights for thinking of the money some of 'em earn in a day. I told him I got my pickin' done for nothing, eh, my dear?" with a smile at Diana.

She looked over to me and said laughingly, "I'm the picker; it's the only work I do in the year, if you're to believe some people; I pick them all and store them in the apple-loft; it's my special preserve and Heaven help anyone who intrudes."

"I'll remember," I smiled.

"You shall be allowed a look-in; the smell's delicious, heavenly; isn't it, John?"

"Pretty good, my dear, but I prefer steak and onions; now

that's a smell, Mr. Carden, that'd make a dying man sit up and call for a platter, eh?"

I nodded with a smile and, having finished my meal, was fumbling in my pocket for my pouch when he proffered his own, saying, "Care for twist? I've smoked it for fifty years and wouldn't give a thank you for anything else," and as I shook my head and drew out my own pouch he went on approvingly, "Quite right; changing your 'bacca is worse'n changing horses in mid-stream, as they say. You don't grow apples, Mr. Carden? You might do worse; I've never lost on my apples in forty years; better think about it." Chuckling, "I'd lend you my picker."

"Perhaps Mrs. Searelle would give me a few lessons," I suggested, smiling.

"If you're quick in the uptake," Diana said; "I couldn't stand a dull pupil; I'm picking a few of the carlies this evening," she went on, her glance flashing over to me and away again.

"That's right," put in Searelle genially; "come over and stay to supper; I'll be in Barneford till ten, but I'll be back to supper. Now then?"

"Splendid idea; but if I'm going to idle my evening away picking apples I must be off and put in a good day."

"Idling, eh?" chuckled Searelle, "plain enough you've not done much fruit-picking, Mr. Carden; you'll be glad of a long spell after an hour of it, first go off, I can tell you."

We picked but one bushel that evening, Diana and I. And then we carried it up to the apple-loft, a dim, cool place so sweet-scented (as she had said) as to steal away the senses even had there been nothing else besides. We put down the apples, a little breathless from our climb up the ladder, and stood a long moment looking into each other's shadowed faces; and then we laughed softly and kissed and clung to each other and laughed again, but now unsteadily because of the riot and turmoil in our blood. And presently we made a deep bed

of hay in one corner of the loft and there we had our joy of each other, not once or twice, until it grew completely dark and we drowsed asleep and woke of a sudden into that fragrance, made deeper and more intoxicating by the darkness and by our passion now so richly fed but yet unsated. We drew apart with sweet caressing reluctance, both wondering how long we had slept, a little uneasy, but not caring. I struck a match and found it just after ten and we clambered down and ran together over to the farmhouse, to find the supper laid but Searelle not yet back. Even as we stood blinking a little under the lights and smiling into each other's flushed, transfigured faces, we heard the car's horn at the road corner, kissed once again, and hurried out to meet the man we had betrayed. I do not remember feeling even the faintest trace of remorse or shame; I was intoxicated with a rich bodily bliss; exalted; rapt away in a very heaven of the flesh; there was no place or room in me for any other emotion; John Searelle was less to me in that moment than one of the big green grasshoppers that were chirping so noisily in the grass all about us as we went to meet him.

"Not supped yet?" he asked; "too bad; you must be starving; shouldn't have waited for me; might 've been eleven before I was back; like picking, Mr. Carden?"

"I don't," I said boisterously; "turned it in, in fact, as soon as we'd picked a bushel; collapsed into a chair and smoked for the rest of the evening."

"It wasn't quite as bad as all that," laughed Diana, "there wasn't really more than a bushel or two ready; come along in with you, you old fesser, the car's all right."

Searelle straightened himself and laughed. In the clear light reflected from the white wall opposite I saw him raise his head; he began sniffing loudly and turned towards Diana. He rubbed his hands, "Not—not—" he began, when she interrupted him with a laugh, "Oh, but it *is* steak-and-onions! now isn't that a nice surprise?"

He put his hands on her shoulders and then drew her close

and kissed her. "You're a grand woman, Di," he said, with a low chuckle. "God! but I'm hungry."

I was henceforward a welcome guest at Brock Farm. There remained only to arrange for an equally warm welcome for Diana at The Nurseries. This time there was no necessity to scheme; the gods played all the cards for us.

Barneford Fair, held annually for three days in the middle of September, was one of those time-honoured festivals to which all the countryside hastens to make carnival. Not to have been to Barneford Fair on at least one of the three days was to stamp oneself as a curmudgeon or a miser; the avid of revelry without any discrimination went every day and stayed on Saturday night till the last booth closed its doors and the last naphtha flare was extinguished; the connoisseur chose Friday when the hoi-polloi of Barneford had spent all their cash and those from the countryside were not yet arrived; but since, as far as I was concerned, it was a children's festival we went on Saturday when, ere they closed, the revels flared up into a final pandemonium of merriment.

We drove over, May and I and the two children, shortly after lunch, and we were prepared to stay until ten o'clock or so. We left the fair-ground to have tea in Sennick's big restaurant in the High Street; there was still one vacant chair at our table and it was one of the half-dozen or so left in the large room; and presently the waitress (piloted doubtless by those guardian gods) brought Diana Searelle to our table. May, of course, by this time knew all about the Searelles and had tentatively accepted an invitation to Brock Farm to tea but had not yet found the time or the inclination to go. Introductions being made Diana sat down and we were presently all chatting and laughing together. May seemed prepared to be friendly but Tessa (and here the gods played their trump card) fell head over heels in love with Diana in the quite passionately emotional way girls of her age so frequently do with young and attractive women. Before tea was over she and Diana were like old school-friends, with

more than a touch of worship on Tessa's part. When we went back to the fair-ground Diana accompanied us and before we parted for the night mutual invitations to tea and picnics and bathing-parties had fallen about our heads like rain and had moreover all been accepted. Even Alister seemed to have fallen under Diana's spell and was plainly pleased that so delightful a person was to be added to our social circle.

And now the course of our voyage of passion was set and all appeared plain-sailing; all indeed was plain-sailing and for three years I found in Diana's arms more happiness, more intensely-felt joy and utter bodily contentment than I had ever known, than I had believed the body able to bestow. Yet never in all that time of keenly-felt pleasure did I for one moment displace Barbara's image in my heart; not in those instants of supreme physical rapture when sensation treads deliciously upon the verges of unconsciousness; even then I knew, incapable of thought as I might be, that had Barbara been in my arms I should have attained a heaven beyond any that Diana's passionate body could give me.

During those three years our business prospered amazingly; the end of the War, which brought down so many beggars from their horses, which shut off for ever from ten thousand homes the golden stream which had during those four years irrigated them as richly as the untimely blood of youth had watered the battlefields, opened to us so many more markets that our turnover rapidly began to overtake, to equal and to pass that of many of the oldest firms in the Trade. I base that rather boastful statement upon the information received from salesmen in a dozen or so markets as far east as Brighton and as far north as Manchester; and about such matters salesmen are dependable enough, for they have no object in lying. We had now, in fact, become a wealthy concern; I think this may best be demonstrated by comparing our average weekly pay-roll of fifteen pounds during our first year at Boughton with that of our seventh year which was three

hundred and fourteen pounds ten shillings. We had bought a great deal more land and our original small acreage had increased to over forty.

Alister at sixteen was a prefect; he had for some time shown himself very keenly interested in biology and was already familiar with the work of Lamarck, Cuvier, Huxley, Haeckel, Darwin and Haldane. It was chiefly because Haldane was then lecturer in biology at Cambridge that Alister had decided to go there when he was eighteen and while there was no financial need for it he would probably go on one of the very generous Exhibitions open to Barneford Grammar School boys.

Tessa had been at St. Hilda's High School, Felcombe, since she was twelve and while her career there did not repeat Alister's triumphant progress at Barneford she was doing well enough and could have maintained herself there by scholarships had no money been available.

Aunt Alice had died the year after the end of the War. It seemed a strangely sudden passing, for she was only sixty-seven and was, as she had always been, remarkably strong and well. She died in her sleep for no apparent reason at all; her heart simply stopped and Aston, who gave the certificate, was as surprised as we were. "Just a sudden hitch in apparently good sound machinery," he said; "not uncommon and always puzzling."

I cannot pretend that her death moved me in any way. Kind as she always was to me and invariably devoted as she had always been to my comfort and welfare and to May's and the children's, I never liked her; her illiteracy, her coarse accent and a certain quality of vulgarity, as it seemed to me, in her had grated on me in the very beginning and all her virtues never mitigated its irritation. But May felt her loss keenly, the children missed her and mourned her to the utmost of youth's capacity which happily is, I imagine, not very much; but the blow, without any exaggeration, swept Uncle Fred off his feet and it is the simple truth to say, trite and

hackneyed as the saying is, that he was never the same man again; the shock played, I am sure, no small part in that complete breakdown which had been foreshadowed by that odd attack in the early days at Boughton, which we had all agreed to ascribe to the sun.

I have never been able to determine with any certitude when suspicion first began to whisper about Diana and myself; but that, of course, is the usual way of such liaisons; the two people most concerned, self-engrossed in their Paradise and, as is the way of adulterous lovers, underestimating not only the intelligence of their immediate circle but the delight in a scandalous tit-bit of the general run of the community of which they are members, fail completely to see the plain signs that the secret is out and are, in consequence, genuinely shocked and amazed when the blow falls, as it inevitably must. But I was in a way prepared, for I had, anyhow, during some months, imagined that Alister's attitude to me had changed, that he was at times regarding me with a distressed bewilderment which continually halted unhappily on the verge of a request for enlightenment, that his complete trust in me and his deep affection were slowly being ousted by doubts and resentments; and since there seemed nothing else to which I could ascribe these wounding and humiliating changes, I was at first inclined to ask myself whether the one person in the world from whom I most passionately wished to hide our secret had not been the first to guess it. But that change in him was so indefinite, so shadowy, so linked with his countless variable moods of that period, that I was finally able to banish my disturbing thoughts by referring his behaviour to the difficult stage of adolescence through which he was then passing. And in this comforting conclusion I received support from Aston, to whom I had mentioned my concern one particular day when Alister had seemed listless, preoccupied and wrapped in a sort of melancholy introspective-ness, so utterly unlike his usual vivid, social, light-heartedness.

"What is he? nearly sixteen, isn't it?" Aston smiled, "well, what d'you expect? Have you forgotten all your own mental upheavals and disturbances and self-questionings at that age? Let him alone; get out of his way; I've a notion that more lives are messed up by presumptuous, priggish and bumptious interference with youngsters between the ages of fourteen and seventeen than this world dreams of, and specially that part of this world ruled over by pedagogues, parsons, magistrates, and other ex-officio poke-noses; my dear fellow, it's on a par with shoving a probe into a babe's cranium to see if it's brain's there; your job's to stand aside until you're asked by the person most concerned to put a finger in the pie; and nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine times in a thousand you won't be asked and a damned good job too; all young people are best served if left to work out their own problems and I'm inclined to think that when one *is* asked the best plan even then is to say: 'Don't ask me; find your own solution'; that, anyhow, has been my method with Arthur, and as far as I can judge, a successful one; he's eighteen now and he stands on his own feet like a man twice his age; he goes up to Cambridge next month, and he's a man, and from what I've seen of his contemporaries he'll be one of a few men among a crowd of boys."

And so I dismissed Alister's disturbing moods from my mind and pushed my head farther under the sand.

It was about nine months after Aunt Alice's death that I learned my mistake, although not as regards Alister. And while an almost miraculous intervention of the gods saved the situation our fool's Paradise was no longer inviolate, but was invaded by an enemy threatening not only its happiness but its whole existence.

Diana and I were alone in one of the tomato-houses. Foolishly rash, considering it was broad daylight and all the work of The Nurseries was in full swing, I had suddenly put my arms about her and kissed her; it is true that there was no one near, but it was not that which I must plead to

excuse my folly so much as that blind, fatuous sense of perfect safety which so often seems to possess men and women when their illicit association has gone undiscovered for a lengthy period. It finally betrays them as it betrayed us then.

As I released Diana Uncle Fred went past the tomato-house. His back was towards us and I was convinced he had seen nothing; but his apparition was nevertheless rather startling, although we both laughed and made light of it.

Diana stayed to luncheon but went immediately afterwards. About three o'clock I was in one of the chrysanthemum houses when Uncle Fred came in, closed the door behind him, dropped the catch, put down the stool he was carrying, and seated himself, said quietly, "Busy, Richard?"

And at once I knew what was coming, and as I leaned back against the shelves and smiled down at him and replied, "Well, not tremendously," my mind was working at high pressure to settle in the few seconds available my plan of campaign.

"I'd like a few words with you," he went on; and as he spoke I noticed suddenly how old and tired he looked and how grey about the mouth.

"Go ahead, Uncle," I replied lightly, "anything wrong."

"You can tell me that, my boy, you know what I'm referring to?"

"No," I replied, to gain time rather than of any set purpose, although had I reasoned it out it was the only reply I could have made.

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Richard," he went on, "but I saw you kissing Mrs. Searelle this morning; I couldn't help it; I came full on you."

"Oh, well," I shrugged my shoulders, "it's not a great crime, is it?"

"Perhaps not, my boy; depends on the way one looks at these things; but it's not the first time I've seen you kissing her." He looked up at me gravely and as he put the blunt question I knew by his expression that there was small need

for me to answer—"Are you and Mrs. Searelle lovers, Richard?" he asked.

I was about to lie, anyhow to fence to gain more time; I smiled, made a gesture with my hand, but his glance held mine so searchingly that I was playing with the notion of admitting everything when with startling suddenness his expression changed to one of bitter hostility; he seemed about to speak and then he uttered a sharp cry, put up his hands to his head, swayed on the small camp stool and then, before I could jump to his assistance, had capsized the stool and fallen to the floor, just as he had done nearly four years previously. But this time he did not get lightly to his feet, smiling at the accident, but lay on his side, his head twisted a little so that his eyes stared blankly up into my face, while from his open mouth there issued an inhuman, gobbling, gurgling noise, as if his throat were damming an outrush of bubbling liquid.

I shouted for assistance and we got him to bed and telephoned for Aston. It was a stroke and a very severe one. Although he lived for eighteen months afterwards and was, after a while, able to sit up in a wheeled chair he never again spoke or heard, nor did any use return to his feet and hands. He was more dead than alive; that grotesque Chinese death of a thousand slashes which had so possessed my childish mind seemed to be demonstrated in him in all its gruesomeness; there was so little left of him now to die. But his intelligence lived; his emotions lived; his love and his hate lived; oh, yes, he hated me now; it was plain enough for me to see; so plain indeed that I was convinced everyone else must see it in his eyes, which always seemed turned on me whenever I was present. I used to feel that he was summoning all his forces to bring back but for one moment the power of speech so that he might denounce me. Yet he had been a man as generous, as warm-hearted, as tolerant and forgiving as any man I had ever known; but in those dulled, sombre, half-dead eyes, as they turned on me day after day for over a

year, there was no warmth, no generosity, no tolerance, no forgiveness; nothing but a burning hatred that hungered and thirsted in an agony of hopeless struggle for articulation. It was, I am convinced, the stroke which was responsible for the change in him; my uncle as he had been and as I had always known him would have forgiven me as he had forgiven countless others in his life; but the blow which had so shattered his physical being had also worked some vile subtle change in his brain, so that the very essence of him was disrupted, broken down, altered out of recognition; his real self was no longer there; the man of wide sympathies, of deep understanding and limitless toleration was become a shut-in, confined, narrow, primitive creature, with hate its only motive-force and vengeance its sole aim.

For eighteen months each of us endured that ordeal, he the anguish of that hopeless fight for articulation and I the weight of his malignant hatred. It was that titanic struggle (more dreadful perhaps for the others to watch for they were ignorant of its cause, and pained and bewildered by its shocking manifestations) which killed him at the last. It was one evening in late September. Diana was with us and we had had his chair brought out into the garden where we were sitting in deck-chairs watching the sunset. May had Tessa beside her and Alister on the grass at her feet and the three were chatting gaily with Mark Searelle who for over two years had been home from college and was now managing the farm. Diana sat between me and Tessa who was holding one of her hands and gently stroking her bare arm. I was smoking, half-listening to the talk and half-occupied with my own thoughts. "Don't you think so, Richard?" Diana asked suddenly and put a hand upon my arm. I did not know to what she was referring and sitting up turned to her with a smile and was about to say something facetious when a noise like nothing else but the roar of an animal burst from Uncle Fred and brought us all to our feet. He was glaring straight at me; his mouth gaped; for a fraction of a second his lips

quivered, his tongue trembled, as if at last he was about to achieve speech; and the helpless hands in his lap fluttered as if they too had received back the vanished power; and then, as May and I ran to him, his head dropped forward on his breast, his whole body sagged in his chair and so plain was the evidence of death that we carried him to his bed and having telephoned for Aston I undressed him and put clean linen upon him as if it were a shroud; he was, in fact, then already dead.

Diana came to the funeral and then for a week I did not see her and only heard of her through Tessa's being over at the farm, from which indeed she could not keep away, so that Alister chaffed her for being in love with Mark; she was certainly in love, but not with Mark.

Uncle Fred in his will, executed only a few days before his stroke, left everything to May with reversion in equal shares to the two children. May expressed no surprise at its terms, and I made no comment; while mentally cursing the fact that there had never been any deed of partnership drawn up between us and that even the twelve thousand pounds received from Riley's for the Carner Insecticide had gone into the business in Uncle Fred's name. I was therefore penniless, dependent upon May's bounty; and as I thought over this humiliating position I considered for some time pointing out to May that I was, at least, entitled to the Riley money out of the estate; but I finally decided to wait, hoping that in bare justice May would herself make the offer; she, however, said nothing and presently I had too much else to think about; later that sum was to be offered me as a contemptuous bribe by Tessa, the one person in the whole world who most hated me. One clause only in the will saved me from what would have been little better than pauperdom; it was a clause in which Uncle Fred expressed the wish that I should remain as nominal head of the business with a salary to be mutually agreed upon by May and myself or ten per cent. of the

net annual profits, whichever I preferred; I chose the percentage.

It was, of course, clear to me that Uncle Fred, at the time he executed that most unjust will, was aware of my association with Diana and all it implied, and that it had been so framed on the assumption that a divorce was very probable; in that case, said the will in effect, you will have to begin life afresh with your new wife and every penny goes to the woman you have wronged. Crystal clear that was to me; I was a blind fool not to see that it was equally clear to others.

I was by no means disturbed at not hearing from Diana; I reasoned that she considered it best on all counts to stay away for a while; I had told her at the time of that tragic interview with Uncle Fred and we had frequently discussed the possibilities of others sharing his suspicions; but we had come to no definite conclusion and certainly made no plans as to our course of conduct in that eventuality. But at the end of ten days my desire to see her overcame all other feelings and I drove over to the farm about eight o'clock in the evening. At the sound of my car pulling up outside Searell himself came out to meet me and his oddly constrained manner as he asked me in and somehow the fact that he was wearing a smart lounge suit (the rarest occurrence with him) filled me with an uneasy foreboding.

He led the way inside almost in the manner of one showing a stranger over a house and as soon as we were in the parlour he switched on the light and as I sat down by the window he drew the blinds and took a chair facing me. And abruptly I knew the secret was out. "Richard," he said, "We've a bad half-hour in front of us," and there was in his tone nothing but sorrow, dejection and a plain distaste for his job.

"Yes?" I replied, my voice sounding flat, foolish and inadequate.

"I know, Richard," he went on, "that you and Diana

have—have—well,” with a gesture of his hand, “you understand, I fancy, and don’t need any words of mine.”

I nodded.

“I want you to promise it shall end.”

“What does Diana say?”

“Never mind that, Richard. I want your promise to give her up.”

“I’m sorry; I can’t give it.”

“Is that your last word? Think it over well. I don’t ask for an answer now. Take your time.”

“I don’t need any time. I’m sorry, Searelle; damnably sorry, for what that’s worth; but I can’t give Diana up. All I can do is to ask you to divorce her so that we can marry. Where is she? Why isn’t she here?”

“In a minute, Richard, in a minute,” he replied quietly; “it’s not a question of divorce.”

There was an odd inflection in his voice which puzzled me, irritated me. “What do you mean?” I asked sharply.

“I’ve no intention of divorcing Diana, and she doesn’t want it.”

“I don’t believe it; where is she?”

“In Wales; she went last Tuesday.”

I could only repeat, “in Wales, last Tuesday,” staring at him like a fool.

He nodded. “Yes; you see it’s like—well, it’s just that we’re going to forget the unhappy affair and begin again.”

“It’s a lie,” I broke out; “d’you think I’m to be bamboozled like that; I’ll take it from Diana and from no one else.”

“I’m sorry you won’t believe me; I’d hoped,” he broke off, and going over to his desk took out a sealed envelope and gave it to me. “She left it for you,” he explained; “but only if you refused to believe me. I’ll go out for a pipe,” and he turned away and left me alone.

Here is that letter, as vile as ever written by a woman: “My dear, I’m sorry you will be reading this: I had hoped

you would taken John's word. We are going to make a fresh start. Mark is taking the farm and we are going away for a long holiday. I do not know in the least when we are likely to return; we may not come back at all and, in any case, we shall be away for some years as John has decided to hand over everything to Mark and to take a long holiday; we are first going to Australia, to Sydney, where we shall stay with his brother; after that I don't know. Can you forgive me, Richard, for going away like this? Don't think it was done on the spur of the moment. I have thought it over and over through many sleepless hours and it seemed to me if not the best way then the easiest for you. Do you want me to say I still love you? I should lie if I said anything else. But I love John too. Not in the same way, I know, and I cannot help honouring him for all he has said and done since I told him. But he already knew, had guessed it over a year ago. I don't know how we could have been so blind, so stupid, as not to realise he *must* have known. Good-bye, Richard, Good-bye. DIANA."

I crumpled up the letter and tossed it into the empty grate. And then I picked it out, straightened it and put it into my pocket. I have it still. And then, without waiting for Searelle's return, I walked quietly out, got into my car and drove furiously away. I never saw Searelle or Diana again and only heard of them through the children's friendship with Mark.

I covered those five miles home in but few more minutes, hurtling recklessly through the narrow, winding, high-hedged lanes, throwing up clouds of red dust, careless what might be round any one of the innumerable bends, my mind a wash of bitter thoughts. In those tormenting moments of humiliation I hated Diana, cursed her and could have killed her. I knew every word of her letter was a lie, the whole thing specious cant. The whole vile business was daylight clear; she knew of the will; knew if we married and left The Nurseries she came with a pauper and she had no stomach for that; so she

ratted and went where the money was; the false, lying, cozening, cajoling bitch.

In that murderous mood I was unable to think clearly; but one thing I was determined to do: to make a clean breast of it to May and let her do what she would; what that would be I neither cared nor made any attempt to guess.

We still occupied the same room (that, of course, for appearance's sake; pah! the things women will do for that grinning spectre!) but not the same bed. I did not wait until May was undressed but began as soon as she came upstairs, where I had purposely preceded her by ten minutes. "Look here, May," I said abruptly, savagely, "I've committed adultery with Diana hundreds of times during the past three years; what're you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," she replied quietly, "or I should have done it long ago."

"What!" I shouted, "you knew? Christ in Heaven, does all the county know?"

"I hope not, Richard. I hope even your children don't know; but did you care very much *who* knew?"

"Did I care?" I repeated blankly; "did I care? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, well, if you don't know I won't tell you; we won't go into it all now; I've known about it nearly two years and, as I say, I hope the children——"

"Leave the children out of it for God's sake," I interrupted harshly; "I asked you what you were going to do about it?"

"And I told you, nothing; and it's just because of the children that I've done nothing and intend to do nothing. There's no need for you to say anything further, Richard. I know that Mrs. Searelle has gone back to her husband and that they're——"

"Do you, by God!" I broke in angrily; "and how in the devil's name d'you know that?"

"John Scarelle came over and told me himself," she replied quietly.

I sat up in bed and stared at her; but before I could speak she went on, in that calm, quiet, matter-of-fact, maddening tone, "so we'll drop the subject if you please, Richard, and forget about it."

"Not kicking me out?" I said viciously; "you can, you know; you're boss; that ten per cent. charge was only a pious wish. I'll clear out in the morning and save you the job."

"You'll do no such thing, Richard; if not for your own sake or mine, then for the children's, for Alister's. I'm sure they know nothing. Are you going to run away and let some dirty-mouthed person put two and two together and then drop this filth into their ears?"

"That'll do," I said roughly, "I'll stay; on sufferance, I suppose."

"There'll be no sufferance as far as I'm concerned. I've said I'll forget it and I mean what I say. And the best we can do is to start forgetting it straight away. Shall I put out the light? Good-night."

But I had yet another blow to come. Alister for the past six months had been using a motor-cycle for his daily journey and a few mornings later he came in after breakfast from tinkering with it and said he couldn't get the engine to fire and would I drive him in as it was too late for the train.

As we slipped along the lanes, cool and quiet at that early hour, I thought he seemed unusually quiet and preoccupied and as I did not wish to break into his thoughts I refrained from speaking. About half-way there he shifted uneasily in his seat, turned a little towards me and then, with startling abruptness, as if he were blurting it out quickly lest he should be afraid to speak if he thought it over, he said, "Father, were you and Di lovers?"

The car swerved and the trimmed hedge grated screechingly against the side; but I regained immediate control of myself and for a moment, while my thoughts raced in pur-

suit of a quick decision, I kept silent. He too was silent, but his glance remained on my face. And then, as abruptly as he had spoken, I took my decision. "Yes, Alister," I said, "we have been lovers for three years." And then, as he made no reply, I went on, "You understand all that means, don't you?"

"I know," he said quietly.

The car was crawling now. It was as much as I could do to drive at all. The whole of my life seemed to be gathered up into a single minute point of light which was threatened with extinction. Out of all the torrent of words tumbling headlong through my mind I could piece together no coherent sentence. And then he spoke again, "I'm sorry I startled you, Father; it was silly to say it then, but I've been going to ask you for a long while and I felt suddenly that if I didn't get it out now I never would."

"For a long while, Alister?" I repeated blankly.

"For months," he replied; and at my muttered "My God! what next?" he went on in a tone that was shy, embarrassed and yet (how it moved me to realise that!) still affectionate; "is it as bad as all that, Father? I mean," hurriedly, "this—this sex side of life; can't—can't a man help himself?"

I would have given much to have lied to him then and to feel sure that he believed the lie; but I could not do it; perhaps the old habit was too strong. "It is pretty bad, Alister," I said slowly, "but it's not true that a man can't help himself; I could have helped myself; I could have stopped it; I didn't want to stop it; that's all. But it's all over and done with now," I continued, accelerating mechanically; "Mr. Searelle and Diana are going away, going away for good." And then I added bitterly, "but perhaps you knew that too?"

"No, I didn't know." He fell silent. We were entering now the wide main road whose scattered houses marked the

beginning of Barnesford. "Drop me at Ferney's bookshop, will you, Father?" he asked. I drew in to the kerb and he got out and then he turned and held out his hand to me. "We'll forget all about it, Father," he said; "is that right?" He gripped the hand I gave him so hard that it hurt me and then at my nod, for I did not trust my voice, he moved away quickly across the pavement and vanished into the gloom of Ferney's shop.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FERGUSONS

THE two years between the Searelles' departure and Alister's going to Cambridge, are in recollection, dredge my memory as I may, almost completely barren, as if they had scarcely existed or existed only in a nearly forgotten dream; my condition might, I imagine, be most aptly compared to one of partial anaesthesia, mental and spiritual; there remains with me now little of those two years but a shadowy sense of wretchedness, of mortification, and of a constant state of conflict between myself on the one side and Tessa and May on the other, with Alister aloof, serene, above the battle. It was a conflict none the less real, oppressive and wearing because it never broke into action, never even came to the point of a verbal engagement which might have brought some relief; it was indeed a secret war of attrition in which I, with no allies and with the humiliating sense of fighting for a degrading cause, suffered most. Perhaps had my son joined with me in that fight things would not have come to the sorry pass they did; but even as I write that I know it for the specious folly it is; how could Alister have joined forces with me in a conflict of which he must have been almost unaware, seeing that it existed chiefly in my mind, in my spirit? even had it broken its way to the surface revealing itself in recrimination and acts of hostility, he could not have borne a part, for it would have degraded him, dragged him down to the level of the morass in which I stumbled and floundered; no! I would not have had that happen, could it have purchased me new life, my youth and all my youthful dreams.

But this picture of unceasing conflict is unfair to May and I repeat again that it was mainly my own mental condition

rather than an actuality; what little there was of reality in the struggle was concerned only with Tessa. May during those two years never referred to the past, openly or by innuendo, nor by any action of hers showed resentment or disclosed the breakdown of our life together; she was, indeed, gentler, kinder, more forbearing (and not with me alone) than she had been for many years; and yet all her gentleness and forbearance, all her care to keep my financial dependence in the background, all her kindness, failed to touch me, failed even to win any sense of gratitude in me, indeed irked and fretted and irritated me.

But perhaps most bitter of all was my realisation that in Tessa, who hated me and made no effort to hide it, I could not fail to see much of myself; she and not Alister, it seemed to me, was bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh; At times I had the odd fancy that she was born of the evil in me and Alister of the good; that she knew this and in our struggles she sought to subjugate me to her evil and to cut me off for ever from my son's good; an odd disturbing fancy; the fancy of a sick mind.

For sick indeed my mind was then and my body none too hale. How could it be hale with the life I was leading? I was giving less and less time to the business; why should I, seeing now that none of it was mine? I was certainly not earning my ten per cent.; but I was taking it and felt no qualms about the taking; Riley's twelve thousand must still have rankled; that is the only excuse I can make for giving next to nothing in return for what I took. And as I gave less and less time to the business I gave more and more to drinking and if the drinking were accompanied by golf, shooting, fishing and hunting these were mere excuses, mere adjuncts retained because of their social side. But while the circle of my acquaintances and drinking-cronies widened that of my friends narrowed; I did not regret this at all; I desired it, hastened it until at last I had thrust even Aston outside its shrinking periphery.

And as more and more I let go the reins at The Nurseries they were gathered up and held tight in the efficient hands of John Rendle who seemed, if anything, to grow younger and more energetic and capable with the years. He was then fifty, but even in my eyes looked five years my junior rather than my senior. And as he gathered up the reins and drove the business forward on its course of increasing prosperity his attitude towards me changed; slowly enough it is true but not too slowly to be apparent, at least, to me; we were no longer master and man but equals; and I began to notice in him a familiarity that verged on insolence so that I began to suspect that he knew the facts of my changed status, that he was aware of the terms of the will, if he had not actually read them. Was that also a mere freak of my sick mind? It may well have been; I am ready to admit it and yet his attitude to May had not changed at all; she was the mistress and he the man; that was clear enough to me; then why not the other? But it does not matter; if his insolence were a fantasy of my mind, a sick hallucination, there were in time to be in our relations hard and ugly facts about which there could be no mistake.

However grotesque may have been my fancy that Tessa was the child of my flesh as Alister was of my spirit she was undoubtedly like me in many ways, not least physically, and at seventeen was well above the average height of fully-grown women and, if anything, a trifle too broad and square-shouldered; her colouring was mine, her hair and her features also; but these were naturally softer and the modelling of her face was finer; there was nothing masculine about Tessa and she was, in fact, a remarkably attractive girl; even had my eyes, certainly not biased in her favour, not been aware of that fact the plain admiration of Mark Searelle and Arthur Aston, to name only two of the youngsters who began to take on the guise of shadows haunting The Nurseries, would have hammered that fact into me. What she thought about her admirers I neither knew nor cared, but assuredly

while Diana Scarelle was available as an object of worship they stood no chance at all. She and Alister had always been good friends, a relationship which I had never viewed with equanimity and which I admit I had often regarded with jealousy and resentment. After the Scarelles had gone they seemed to draw even closer together, or perhaps the movement was only on her part; but the result in my eyes was the same and I was again haunted by that old, unhappy suspicion that in their warm and very amicable association there was much from which I was shut out. I was unable to hide from myself the mortifying fact that by reason of that unbridgeable gap between the generations I must inevitably in some things, small and trivial as they might be, find myself an outsider; but added to this was the knowledge that there fought against me not only the years but Tessa's sheer animosity and, bitterest of all, I dreaded that there might be added to this animosity some measure of dismayed contempt and aversion from Alister for my liaison with Diana; and this dread the recollection of that sincere and warm hand-grip outside Ferney's bookshop did little to ameliorate. But there I was mistaken and as far as I could judge, keen, pitifully keen, as my eyes were to detect it, I failed to notice in Alister any lessening of his affection or respect; but, indeed, respect I would not have bothered about, so much the suppliant had I become in those two sick years, and would have been more than satisfied with his affection; that, at least, I merited if not the other; it is now my sole happiness that I retained both.

We resumed towards the end of that damnable period many of our old ways, going together on walks, playing golf, sailing and fishing; and with the strong weapon of his love I drove off and defeated for a time the habits that were threatening to disrupt me.

His career at Barnesford went on steadily from one success to another. At seventeen he was captain of the school and had his caps for rugger and rowing. He gained two

exhibitions, totalling £270 annually for four years, to Peterhouse College, Cambridge, the Lawson Jones Exhibition for Physics and the John Harper Exhibition for English Literature; and it was during the September before he went up that after a long day's fishing we sat outside *The Three Anglers* on Appledore quay and talked of his future.

It was then I learned, to my dismay, that he was seriously considering adopting medicine as a profession. "It's not," he said, "that I'm no longer keen on biology, Father; I am; tremendously so; but somehow now research work as an end, I mean as an end so far as it concerns me, doesn't appeal to me; it's not enough; it's too cloistered; too shut away from the hurly-burly of life; it lacks the human element and it's just that element which I feel I want in my work; I want to be in touch with human beings and not shut away in a laboratory, however valuable might be the work I could do there." And then, noticing I suppose that his news was in the nature of an unpleasant surprise to me, he added, "you're disappointed, Father?"

"Perhaps I am; but I'm certainly surprised; I thought that—"

"You thought," he broke in with a little laugh, "that I thought, as you do, that all doctors are mumbo-jumbo merchants."

"Well, don't you?"

"Not altogether. I'll admit, what everyone will admit, doctors as freely as anyone else, that a great deal of their job is sheer mumbo-jumbo; but there is a residue of real solid worth. Take surgery, for example. I've just been reading a life of Lister and well, Father, no science that was all mumbo-jumbo could have so improved things out of all recognition as modern surgical technique has done."

"Is it anything more than the technique of finger manipulation, mere craftsmanship?" I asked.

"My hat, yes!" he laughed; "could mere digital agility

graft a new cornea on to the living eye? give a man back his youth as Voronoff is doing—”

“Voronoff!” I exclaimed, “don’t lug in that fellow’s monkey-tricks, Alister, or I’ll despair of you. Let’s have another drink; I think I’ll have a whisky this time; you sticking to cider? I wish I had your stomach!”

“Even *that’s* not beyond the power of modern surgery,” he laughed; “or it won’t be before long. Think of that! in the future when one reaches, say sixty, one will retire for a few weeks into a pleasant comfortable nursing-home and will then emerge with new stomach, heart, liver, intestines, glands—”

“Why not a new brain so that one’s forgotten all the old sorrows?” I suggested.

“Would people wish to forget everything, joys as well as pains?”

“Probably not.”

“Would you, Father?” he persisted with a smile.

“Well, no; I don’t think so. But let’s stick to facts and you may keep your fantastic rubbish to amuse somebody else.”

“All right, facts, then; but don’t forget *I* was dealing with facts except that last bit. And anyhow to-day’s fantastic rubbish is to-morrow’s commonplace; look at the Curies and Marconi.”

“I don’t want to look at ‘em!” I chuckled; “I’m busily engaged in looking at, for example, Barker the manipulative surgeon. I rather imagine he made your precious orthodox surgeons look a trifle silly; how—”

“Barker, the what did you say, Father?” he asked innocently.

“Manipulative surgeon; good Lord; you’re not going to tell me—”

“I’m not going to tell you anything,” he smiled; “I was only trying to recollect something you said a few minutes ago;

how did it go? I've got it: 'is it anything more than the technique of finger manipulation, mere craftsmanship?' Rather an unfortunate choice of yours, Father, isn't it?"

I laughed. "You score a point there, but it's only a debating one; you know as well as I do the wealth of knowledge that lies behind Barker's finger manipulation and that was just the core of the medical profession's grievance."

"All right; I'll give you Barker." And then he added chaffingly, "I suppose if I followed in his footsteps you'd forgive my choice of such a mumbo-jumbo calling?"

"I'd forgive you a lot more than that in any case," I replied. "Shall we have another drink before we go?"

"Not for me; my stomach may be young but two pints of cider's quite as much as it's prepared to deal with." And as we rose to go, he said, on a graver note, "But you know, Father, I've not made up my mind at all yet and if you really *are* disappointed I'll take a header into biology and immure myself for ever in a retort."

"The retort filial!" I said with a lame attempt at a jest; "but I'd be sorry to think you'd do anything so foolish and sorrier still to think anything I'd said had persuaded you. My dear boy, if you chose to follow the bloodiest trade of all I'd be proud to stand on the pavement and cheer as you marched by; proud but not happy, I'm afraid."

He linked his arm in mine affectionately. "We're a queer gang, human beings," he said quietly. A few moments later as he took his seat beside me in the car he added, "But really, Father, I've not decided anything definite yet."

Alister had a small car of his own (it was I believe a Citroën but strangely enough I find my memory uncertain about that first car of his) and he and Arthur Aston (who had been up at Peterhouse two years) set off together for Cambridge shortly after breakfast on the last day of September. I find that day vivid in my memory now not so much because of my sense of loneliness at his departure (that was to come later)

but because that night for the first time May and I occupied separate bedrooms. We had not discussed the matter and it was something of a surprise to me when I went up to our bedroom after luncheon to find the change had been made and that May had moved into a small room next to Tessa's. May did not refer to it and I, therefore, refrained from comment; my main feeling was one of relief and satisfaction, but it was faintly tinged with a rankling sense that it might have been done on another day; its synchronising with Alister's going away seemed to give it a significance which I somehow found humiliating and resented. But that feeling within a day or so had vanished and I congratulated myself upon my new-found privacy; some considerable time later I was to have reason to congratulate myself further.

That this resentment was so fleeting was undoubtedly due to the increasing sense of loss with which I felt Alister's absence, a sense which grew with the passage of the weeks and was only slightly mitigated by his letters, which I found strangely disappointing, so preoccupied did he seem with his new life; it was a disappointment that would not bear the probe of reason but it was nevertheless sharp. They were at first bright, vividly-written, descriptive letters, exactly the sort I should have expected, telling me of his interest and delight in his surroundings, with humorous vignettes of the many friends and acquaintances he was making and of dons, tutors and masters—there was an especially brilliant little portrait of the Master of Pembroke which I could not help chuckling over, despite the fact that it was part of a letter so disappointing to me that I read it with increasing chagrin and dismay; in it he said that he had now definitely decided to take up the study of medicine and had become very friendly with another freshman, David Moxon, who was also taking up medicine and whose extraordinary story he hoped one day to tell me. There was no earthly reason why I should have felt so unhappy over this letter; Alister, in what had been our last intimate talk together, had plainly

enough prepared me for it, and in any case, I was convinced a father could commit no greater folly than to attempt to influence a son in his choice of a career. And yet as I say I was chagrined and dismayed. But love and logic are no bedfellows and as I brooded over the matter I allowed the wretched thought, wretched and stupid, to invade my mind that all my convictions, beliefs, and prejudices known so well to Alister by our long intimacy weighed no more with him than the whim of a stranger, might well be, indeed, material for light-hearted laughter.

But if his early letters were disappointing by his plain preoccupation with other people his later ones during that Michaelmas term were more disappointing still by their very briefness and almost perfunctoriness; it should have been clear enough to me that this was due to the fact that he was settling down to his studies and, as always with him, once that had happened he had little time to spare for anything else. I knew this well enough, his whole school career had daily demonstrated it and I should have been the first to point that out to another; but I thrust it from my mind and tormented myself with a dozen possible hypotheses, all equally fantastic, to account for his apparent coolness. And then again, just before he came down for Christmas, his letters took a new turn, grew to the length of a dozen sheets and were packed with polemical stuff, mostly political and religious; and these I found even more discomfiting than the others; there was about them, it seemed to me, a thwarting, frustrating quality that threatened (that old disturbing wounding dread!) to shut me out altogether from his mind no less than from his heart.

And so by the time he arrived home I had fallen into an abyss of wretchedness. It must be remembered in mitigation of my folly that I had at this time nothing else but my love for Alister and his love for me to set on the credit side of the balance-sheet of my days. Had I had any happiness in my work or in my domestic life I

should have been spared those humiliating, self-pitying quagmires in which I now stumbled; but in the house there was nothing but May's quiet if kindly indifference and Tessa's open hostility; and in the business Rendle's increasing contempt and insolence, visible as it may have been to no other eyes but mine; that I was chiefly responsible for this state of affairs did not lessen its hurtfulness.

And so as that first term drew to a close I began to look forward to Alister's return, not so much as a lover looks forward to reunion, but as a prisoner to freedom, freedom from the walls which have confined him, for I was indeed confined within the walls of indifference, scorn and hatred. And even there I was to be disappointed, for Alister did not arrive until the twenty-first and left again on the twenty-sixth to stay at the home in Swansea of his new friend, David Moxon, until the Lent Term began on January the fifth, and during those few days I had little chance to have him to myself; for young Aston and Mark Searelle and several girl friends of Tessa's haunted the house, and parties, dances and other of the abominable revels of the season occupied most of his time. And when I managed a round on the links he talked of little else but Peterhouse, medicine and Moxon, especially Moxon, whose strange story he had promised months ago to tell me and had never done so. I expected this story would be one of the first things he would mention, especially when Moxon's name cropped up, but he had said nothing and I would not ask him, and so that tale had to wait nearly a year before I heard it; and then I had to ask for it and learnt that he thought he had already told me! "Thought" is hardly the word; he was convinced he had done so. "Turn up my letters, Father," he wrote, "if you've kept the rubbish (if I'd kept them! I have them all from that first childish letter from London when he was eight to the one dated a month ago), "and I'm sure you'll find the whole yarn." I had no need to refer to them to know he was mistaken, but I wrote and told him I had been through them

all and there was nothing about Moxon's story. When he wrote again he apologised. "I might have known I'd not told you, if I'd thought it over, for it's not a tale one's likely to forget; well, here it is now, anyhow." A queer, disturbing story it was, indeed, but it must wait its turn. I had by then other things to occupy my mind.

It was during the first week of his second December at Peterhouse that he wrote telling me Moxon's story and this enables me to fix with some exactness the date of my first meeting with Rachel Ferguson, which must have taken place very early in November, for I was in Lancashire on business (so the pretence went, although nothing now was settled without both May's and Rendle's *imprimatur*) until the end of September and I am certain that by the time I received the letter in question from Alister, Rachel and her concerns so filled my mind that there was small room for anything else; and, indeed, had it not been for the fact that it was Alister's letter I should not have bothered to read it; I was then only reading one other sort of letters besides his and they were mostly pencilled assignations scrawled on lavender-scented scraps of paper and delivered by express messenger.

It must have been therefore quite early in November; probably the first Saturday. I had been for a day's rough shooting beyond St. Ephs, a village some ten miles from Boughton, and returning to the inn there where I had left my car, I decided that as it was already nearly six and I was wet, tired and hungry, I'd have a scratch meal in the coffee-room and dry out somewhat before going back. There was no one else in the room, but a very cheerful log fire was blazing on the big open hearth, and having brought a large whisky in from the bar, I sat down beside the fire and rang the bell. A pretty slip of a girl of about eighteen came in and gave me the pleasurable information that there were cold sirloin, cold potatoes, pickles, cold apple-tart and, amazingly, stilton cheese; she added with an engaging smile that it would be ready in ten minutes. Barely had the door closed behind

her than I heard the screech of brakes outside the window and a minute later the door opened again and a young woman entered and, as she came towards the fire and the circle of light from the hanging lamp uncovered her from the outer gloom, I forgot my tiredness, my wetness and my hunger. She was only twenty-five, as I learned later, but looked older, being one of those big-bosomed, wide-hipped women who are fully developed in their teens and seem physically mature at twenty. Her head was uncovered, unless a mane of tawny hair may be called a covering; her face was handsome, sensual, all its features large, her eyes brilliant, her mouth wide, scarlet, seductive; her expression bold, almost reckless. She caught my glance, held it, smiled, and at my answering smile she took the big wooden chair on the opposite side of the hearth and with a casual remark from me about the vile weather we at once fell into talk; and while we talked our glances crossed and re-crossed in that swift inventory of desire so soon to be followed by unspoken invitation and acceptance. She had obviously given her order when passing the bar, and the arrival of my tray was almost immediately followed by her own containing ham and eggs and a bottle of Guinness.

And after we had fed we went back to the fire and drank whisky and smoked and chatted, with quick laughter breaking into our talk and with a sense of secluded, warm intimacy as intoxicating as if we were reunited lovers waiting for bedtime in a delicious anticipation which we were versed enough in the art of venery not unduly to hasten.

She was indeed a most seductive and alluring animal and the whisky I had drunk made of her fine body and bold handsome face a picture of flamboyant womanhood desirous and desirable.

Her name was Rachel Ferguson and she lived on the far side of the river at Crofton, where her father was a veterinary surgeon. Crofton was about twenty miles from Boughton as the crow flies, thirty-odd by road.

She was almost devastatingly frank in her brief description

of her home-life. "Father's a widower," she said; "has been since I was six; we've a housekeeper, Nellie Byres; she's —oh, well, you'll see her yourself. Father, according to Crofton gossip, is a drunken and dissolute old reprobate; and for once gossip's not far wrong; but I like a man to be a man, and I drink myself, and we get on together; he's also the best vet in Devon; even Crofton admits that; ever know a Scots vet who wasn't the best man in the district? And it's not filial pride, for I'm a qualified vet myself and know a bull from a bullock."

While we were talking the innkeeper came in. "Your radiator's leaking, sir," he said.

"Badly?"

He nodded. "Emptied itself."

"Damnation!" I exclaimed; "there's a garage here, isn't there?"

"'Fraid it's closed down for the night, sir, but I'll find Crowson, the proprietor, for you. Perhaps he can patch it up for you."

But Crowson, when he came, drew down his mouth in the ominous grimace of his kind and said he could do nothing till the morning. At this Rachel broke in impatiently, "Of course, Tom, you never can!" and then she turned to me and said, "I'll give you a lift; it'll only be a bit of a detour."

"A devilish big one," I laughed. "Look here, drop me at the Darum cross-roads; that's only about three miles from Boughton and I'll not be sorry to tramp the stiffness out of my joints." To this arrangement she agreed and, having told Crowson I'd come for the car the next afternoon, we left. It was then about eight o'clock and the rain had ceased and the wind fallen away almost to a calm; but the sky was still heavy and lowering and the night pitch-black.

When we came to the cross-roads she drew in the car to the grass verge under the trees and turned to me with a smile. "Here we are," she said; "they used to bury the suicides

here; it's as lonely a spot as you'll find in Devon, so if you feel like committing a murder, now's the time."

"It's not murder I feel like committing," I said hotly, and took her in my arms. She returned my embrace and my kisses with a fury of passion that blew my kindling lust to flame. Before I got out of the car to set off homewards (my legs trembling so that I could scarcely stand) she said, "Come along and have dinner with us to-morrow. Father'll be glad to see you; and if he isn't you needn't bother; I shall."

"I'll come," I said. "I'll pick up my car at Crowson's about six or so and come right along. Seven be all right?"

"Seven or sooner," she replied, and smiled, her glance holding mine wantonly as she let in the clutch and slid away into the darkness.

James Ferguson, to my surprise a spare, littleish man, received me with a sort of cynically casual indifference, not bothering to get out of his chair and merely nodding when Rachel said, "This is Mr. Carden, Jamie." The "Jamie" amused me; Rachel told me later that she had never called him father, by his own wish, since her mother died. "That was what she'd called him," she smiled, "so he'd a soft spot, or a daft one, in those days; he's none now, unless it's for Nellie."

Ferguson's manner of receiving me was, as I soon learned, typical of his attitude to life; if such a thing be possible, he had no single illusion left and merely lived to squeeze from life the last drop of pleasure obtainable; when he was no longer able to squeeze, or life to exude its drop, he would, so his manner implied, cut the thin-spun thread himself.

He was crouched before the fire in a large shabby chair; and the only light was a small reading-lamp behind him, and I could therefore see but little of him; but when presently we sat down to dinner and the hanging-lamp was lit I was astonished, first at the smallness of his body and then, in bizarre contrast, the largeness and magnificent modelling of

his head; to describe it the aptest word, much as I dislike it, is awe-inspiring. It was indeed so large, its high broad dome depending so craggily over sunken eyes, short blunt nose, tight-lipped mouth and narrow chin, and topping as it did that meagre frame, that at first glance he reminded one of some hydrocephalic dwarf—not, indeed, that he was actually dwarfish; he was, I imagine, about five feet five or six inches; but the resemblance was there. The head of Charles Peace shows something of that same tremendous modelling as do those of Darwin, Beethoven and Socrates.

It was a poor meal. I never, in fact, had a decent meal at the Fergusons' *Green Shutters*, as he'd named his cottage, out of admiration for George Douglas's *The House With The Green Shutters*, which book he maintained was the only prose masterpiece Scotland had ever produced and its author, after Burns, her greatest writer. The Fergusons never seemed to bother about food, anything would do if it were chewable and there were drink with which to wash it down. It was just as well they were so indifferent, for Nellie Byres, a dark, handsome, sallow woman of middle-age, was a slut who handled food with the infuriating carelessness of a small child helping itself to jam. It was not that the provender was not plentiful or good in its raw state, but by the time Nellie Byres had completed her onslaught upon it it was fit for dogs or the pig-trough, but certainly not for civilised stomachs; hence, I suppose, the whisky with which all washed it down; *all*, it is to be noted, for Nellie ate with us and was, in fact, on such familiar terms with Ferguson that I guessed her his mistress.

The meal was, as I say, a poor one; it must have been poor even by the Ferguson's standard, for Rachel, grimacing at the half-raw boiled cod and greyish sauce, said, "Pot luck with a vengeance! What's the meat, Nellie?"

"Braised steak."

"Tough?"

"Awl m' be."

It was; and the potatoes were a sodden mash; there was no sweet; the biscuits were damp and the cheese a heel of hard Dutch; nothing was said about coffee, for which I was thankful; I could imagine only too well the drench Nellie Byres would have produced.

However, there was plenty of good whisky, and after the meal we sat round the fire and smoked and talked while Nellie, with much clatter, washed up in the kitchen. Later she joined us by the fire and sat knitting without taking any part in the conversation beyond an occasional nod or "Aw, m' be," when Ferguson addressed her directly. He himself said very little for a long while, but lay back in his chair, his short thin legs stretched out, hands thrust into his pockets, a large bent pipe between his teeth. He was smoking cut Cavendish, I a dark flake and Rachel Woodbines (which she chain-smoked and were, she said, the only cigarette she could taste); the fire was large and blazing; there were no windows open; the reek of the whisky and the pungency of the tobacco-smoke combined with the heat of the room to make an atmosphere that for once literally merited the description mephitic. I was accustomed to the foulness of tap-rooms on a winter night; I was inured to the stifling heat of greenhouses; but presently I found my head swimming, my eyes smarting and my nostrils and throat burning; I was convinced that another half-hour in that room would assure me a most virulent cold and sore throat, and for a moment thought of opening the windows, or at least suggesting it; but none of the others showed any signs of discomfort and I therefore abandoned the notion and redoubled my attentions to the whisky; and presently the disturbing symptoms passed and I lapsed into a state of pleasant torpor, just sufficiently awake to take a drowsy share in the talk which, indeed, for a long while was so desultory and fugitive that the smallest concentration enabled me to pass muster.

At the end of a general pause, or it may have been a general nap, Rachel said, "What was wrong with Bentley's mare?"

"Everything," her father replied emphatically, his pipe jerking upwards at the clench of his teeth; "double strangulated hernia and the fool had been giving her pills, pecks of them, from what he said."

"She died?"

"Of course she died. She was worth six of the oaf who owned her; but I've never yet seen a horse that wasn't worth more than any man spawned. Only sane thing about the War Office is that it reckons one horse is worth six men."

"Not six commissioned officers?" Rachel asked, with a flirt of laughter.

"Ay! sixty-six if you like, and brass-hats at that. You in the War?" to me. "Ah, well, I was; if you can call Amiens the War. There's where I learned to drink."

"You never learned to drink, Jamie," scoffed Rachel, "you were born a sot."

"A what?"

"A sot."

"What d'you think, Nellie, hey? m' be, m' be," he mimicked. "A man's a man for a' that. Or liker *for* that. I tubed Nash's bay this morning and he said, 'I wish you'd tube my old woman.'" He chuckled throatily over his pipe. "Know what I said?"

"Something filthy."

"Oh? Well, it was funny," a sudden almost querulous note in his voice; "Nellie laughed till she wet herself. Y'll not hear it now."

"We'll not miss much. Has Mrs. Henriott's Sealyham been fed to-day?"

"Not unless you've fed her."

"That's your job. That's four days now."

"Ay, and she'll go another four days with no harm. What a thing is man, hey, Carter!"

"Carden," I said.

"Ay; Carden. And woman too. Not satisfied with bloating their own carcases, but they must paunch out their pets till

they die of congestion of the liver and cancer of the stomach. Civilisations perish by their bellies and not by their genital organs. Know that, Carden?"

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"You'd be a dam' fool if y' were surprised at anything at your age. I haven't been surprised since I was fifteen, when I hit m' father and he turned and bolted." Again he gave a hoarse, throaty chuckle and then hawked and spat on to the logs, which sizzled at the impact. "Well, thank God I never had a son to lay me out, hey, Carden?"

"I've a son," I replied, "but I can't imagine him laying me out."

"Y' must be a sentimental fool, then. Any son born of woman would lay his father out if it would profit him a bawbee. Or his mother. Slop and clap-trap. What d'you think, Nellie?"

"He wouldn't me," she replied.

His mocking comment upon this was so grossly obscene and so offensive that I was amazed she showed no resentment, but merely muttered her parrot-like, "Aw! m' be."

Something before eleven o'clock he hoisted himself slowly out of his chair, said a surly good-night and walked a trifle unsteadily towards the door, the fume of his pipe trailing behind him. We heard him presently clumping about overhead and when finally he was quiet Nellie Byres got up from her seat, put away her knitting and, with a nod and a muttering that might have been anything, she left us alone.

After a few moments there was again a noise of footsteps directly overhead, and catching my glance, Rachel laughed and said, "They sleep together; that's why she's so dam' familiar; not that I care two straws; she was soft and polite enough at one time when she thought she might be able to hook him into marriage; but as soon as she found out there was nothing doing she became her own sweet natural self."

"She seems pretty inoffensive," I said.

"That's you," she smiled, "company manners. She can

be a devil; like all those sallow, skinny women; but it's not to be wondered at; Father leads her a hell of a life; knocks her about when he's off-colour more than usual." She laughed and added, "That's why he doesn't marry her, I believe."

"I thought it was the other way round," I said.

She shook her head. "Not according to my dear parent. He says if you clout a wife long enough she'll leave you and you'll then have to support her, to say nothing of the man who's lying in your place; but you can knock sweet hell out of a doxy and she'll never quit while the money's good; especially if she thinks there's the chance of a wedding-ring some day or other. What d'you think of Jamie?"

"Not precisely an idealist."

She laughed with a touch of harshness. "I don't believe he ever had any."

"Was that true about his father?"

"Oh, yes; he doesn't lie; not a virtue, but he says he'd be sick if he sank so low as to lie to such cringing vermin as man. Tired?"

"Sleepyish. I must be going."

"You needn't unless you want to," her glance suddenly inviting, lascivious.

"It's the last thing I want to do."

"Then we'll get to bed." I could not restrain a glance at the ceiling, and she went on, "Oh, they're asleep; and if they're not it's no odds. We mind our own business."

I left about two hours before dawn and arriving at The Nurseries while it was still dark, I let myself in and made my way up to my bedroom without disturbing anyone. It was then I congratulated myself upon having my own bedroom; such self-congratulation was to be renewed many times during the next few months.

I dined (or supped if I were late) and slept at *Green Shutters* at least twice a week from then till a few days before Christmas when Alister came home. He spent the whole fortnight of his vacation at The Nurseries, and during that time I did

not see Rachel at all, and for the first time in my life, so strong was my desire for her, I felt with some self-contempt and disgust that I could have dispensed with at least some small portion of the time Alister spent with me. It was, as I say, the first time I had felt like that, and it was to be the last. Even then it was only at the end of his holiday, when we had almost talked ourselves dry and had walked and golfed and gone shooting until the hard exercise had sweated the drink out of me, toned up my stomach and nerves and made me physically fitter than I'd been for months. And as always with me, this fitness gave me a tremendous appetite which the seasonable fare catered for only too richly; and, the one appetite appeased, another and a stronger and fiercer one clamoured for like satisfaction.

We had had indeed much to talk about. A fortnight before he came down he had written to me telling me that odd story of Moxon's to which I have already referred to several times. Here is that letter : My dear Father, I would have bet a thousand pounds to the proverbial penny that I'd told you Moxon's story, but since I've not, here goes. David lives, as you know, at Swansea, and has lived there all his life; his father was a solicitor, which you also know, I believe. David has a sister, Penelope, several years younger than himself; they're the only two; once there were three of them, and that's where the story comes in. Brian, the brother, was eight years older than David and was, so he says now, his hero. Anyhow, he was a fine, big, handsome youngster, and at fifteen stood nearly six feet and weighed over ten stone; he was a fine athlete and, into the bargain, no small potatoes intellectually, and great things were expected of him not only by his people which, I believe, is common (!!), but by his pastors and masters, which is somewhat rarer. His father thought—well, if we say Brian was the apple of his eye we'll not be far out—and when he died (Brian, I mean; oh, yes, he died; I'm a poor story-teller, I'm afraid, especially for a prizeman!) must have felt like Philip over Nicoteles in that lovely

thing in our anthology. But there was a queer side to Brian; not that that was extraordinary, but it was apparently a bit queerer than the common run of queerness; he was given to wandering—the wanderlust, isn't it?—and as young as six or seven had been known to go off for two or three days while the whole household went mad and the police of the county were rung up hourly. And nothing cured him of his wanderlust. They didn't, by the bye, try smacking him; corporal punishment being against Mr. Moxon's principles. And so when shortly after his fifteenth birthday he disappeared no one was very much concerned about it; he was as big and strong as a man, had plenty of money in his pocket and could, it was reckoned, take care of himself. It was true that it was within five days of his returning to school (he was at Malvern) and had it not been Brian it might have been thought that he didn't like going back and had bolted for good to join the army or something similar; but that theory wouldn't hold water as far as he was concerned, for he liked school, was popular and, more significant still, he was in the first rugger team and the rugger season began the next term. And so, as I've said, no one bothered very much. But when the five days went by and he'd not returned they certainly began to worry. However, he came back on the sixth day, as silent as ever about his wanderings (much more silent and strangely quiet this time, David says), and returned to school a day late. Eight months later (and here the story becomes horrible) he noticed a small pale yellowish stain on the back of his hand and later one on his thigh; a little later several violet spots appeared under one of his eyes; he discovered that these stains were singularly devoid of sensation. To cut short a catalogue of horror, Father, he was leprous. He came home and made a clean breast of everything to his father; during those six days away from home he'd been at Cardiff and for two nights he'd slept with a prostitute; she was an octaroon, he said. The day following the confession he went off after breakfast with his gun and, well, you can guess the rest; he

was found with his face shattered and the jury very sympathetically recorded a verdict of accidental death. The affair completely broke the father up and he died a few years later. And that's why, Father, David is studying medicine; he intends making the cure of leprosy his life-work; and I hope to join him; that's why I definitely decided over a year ago to take up medicine rather than biology. Do you know anything about leprosy, Father? It's the most devilish thing. At the risk of boring you I must tell you something about it; it'll help you to understand why David's passion for study is almost like that of a religious devotee.

First and foremost, then, leprosy is a disease confined to man, and it is incurable and always has been (leaving out miracles!); will it always be? That, Father, has been the problem in the past of men like Armauer Hansen of Bergen (who in 1869 first discovered the bacillus of leprosy now named after him), and to-day of men like David Moxon. Of course it can be treated and ameliorated and its progress checked—a little. Until a few years ago they used to dose the patients in the leper-settlements with chaulmoogra oil with such painful gastric and intestinal results that the poor devils refused at last to take it, preferring the pains they knew to the long-drawn-out cramps and colics threatening they knew not what, for the treatment had to go on for years. Now, however, the active principle of the oil is injected hypodermically and apparent cures are made (some even seemingly real if the treatment can begin early enough; but there they're up against the difficulty that only a specialist can detect it in its earliest stages). I say "apparent" cures, because after two or three years of injections (once a week for two or three years and each one hellishly painful!), if they are discontinued because the patient seems restored to health he lapses back, not to his former condition, but to one much worse, and usually dies quickly unless the injections are begun again.

The trouble about Hansen's bacillus (by the bye, in many of the settlements the lepers are now called Hansenians; the

poor devils prefer it; the name sounds less horrible, less hopeless); the trouble about this bacillus is that it can't be cultivated outside the human body, hence a serum is impossible. Thousands of animals have been inoculated with the leprosy virus in an attempt to infect them for the purpose of obtaining a serum, but in vain; the little beggars are immune. A Doctor Danielssen (to redress the balance as between man and beast, I suppose!) inoculated himself, but only produced a septic sore; he then inoculated scores of patients (faith, by jingo! more than I've got, Father, in some professors I know) with no other result; this seems a bit odd, but what it proves the Lord knows, unless it's that leprosy was invented by the devil and only he can supply the cure.

But let's look at the black side of the whole dark business first and we'll come to what little bright side there is presently. I'm afraid it's a case of facts versus hopes. Facts, then, Father: there are over six million lepers in the world; in China alone over a million; Japan 100,000; India nearly a million; Brazil 60,000; in Senegal 3 per 1000 of the population; in Norway (Yes, Norway, Europe!—wasn't Hansen a Norwegian?) several thousand—well, that's enough of round numbers, but there's a fine old historic castle in France to-day where a young and beautiful woman of a famous family lives alone; she is a leper; sounds like a vile distorted fairy-tale, doesn't it? the sort of tale chuckled over in hell. Facts are tough things and the fact is the numbers are not decreasing. Here are a few more facts: the incubation period may be anything from a few months to twenty years; imagine waiting day after day for twenty years for the damnable signs to appear (there's a horrible story about that, but it's too long to tell here). And what are the early signs? white, pale-yellow, violet or rosy-red lozenge-shaped stains appear on the skin. And afterwards what? These stains turn hard and become surrounded by tumours and tubercles which bleed and suppurate; the eye-brows and lashes disappear and the eyes gleam out of round red pits; nostrils and eyes exude pus; the breath becomes as

evil as the exhalation from a plague-pit; the limbs atrophy and sensation slowly departs from the body (the only touch of mercy in the torturing catalogue); fingers, toes, hands and feet drop off; the face turns into a monstrous animal-like mask, the characteristic lion-face or leonine mask; and then death or madness; the step from leprosy to madness is a short one; it's a miracle there's any step at all.

And now the bright side, Father—a twilight brightness! Leprosy is not hereditary; if children are removed from infection at birth they are safe; lepers in the settlements are allowed to marry, but the marriage-service contains a clause that children born of the marriage must be taken away for ever at birth; a happy thought for the poor devil of a woman in the pangs of labour. Other "bright spots" are that as a rule prolonged and close contact is necessary for infection; even cohabiting is not necessarily infective unless over a long period. Only 2 to 5 per cent. of those living with lepers contract the disease. Children and adolescents are the most susceptible (but is *that* a bright spot), adults rarely contracting it unless in a poor state of health. Finally, the infective agent cannot live more than a few hours outside the human body. Not much to balance the dark side of the picture, is it? By the bye, since it's not hereditary, when Elisha said to Gehazi: "the leprosy, therefore, of Naaman shall cleave unto thee and unto thy seed for ever," he was talking through his hat, if he wore one!

And now, Father, the cause of all this horror, the Hansen bacillus, what's it like? I've seen it under the microscope, a tiny blue line (blue because it's coloured with methylene), length 6 micromillimetres, breadth 1 ditto; it's sometimes straight and sometimes curved with a round head; an atom, a mote, an infinitesimal nothing to answer for all those nightmares. The literature of leprosy is full of dreadfully haunting phrases; I've been mugging it all up lately (you'll have guessed that!!); here are some of them: "the skinny cheeks appear varnished"; "the eyelids heavy with bleeding tubercles";

" transparent ears miraculously attached to the shining skull "; " fingers, nose, ears and toes had fallen off like rotten fruit "; " his face was a monstrous mask bitten into with green marks like verdigris "; " men and women and children without faces and without hope"—but that's enough. You won't wonder now that the study of it is David's religion; David who sees the big handsome brother he hero-worshipped walking beside those monstrous shapes or lying in the grass with his face shattered—the only way out. And you'll not wonder, Father, that I, David's friend, have been bitten with the same passion. Your loving son, ALISTER.

The day before Alister went back after that Christmas vacation we had set off after luncheon for a long walk. It was a cold frosty day, the ground hard under our feet, the air blowing in from the sea with an invigorating tang, and by dark-fall we had made a circuit of over twenty miles and were still some four or five from home. I felt better than I had done for many months past, and further to increase my good spirits was the anticipation of my rendezvous with Rachel, already fixed for the following night, when I was to dine there; there was never any question of Rachel dining with us or, indeed, visiting The Nurseries; she was a part of my life kept entirely separate, and I am certain she would have treated with her usual laughing mockery any suggestion of mine that she should make the acquaintance of May and the children—now children no longer.

As we turned off the road into the winding lane which led for nearly three miles to The Nurseries (for we were far from the high road to Barneford which bordered our southern side), I noticed that Alister had fallen suddenly quiet and knew from that peculiarity of his that he was boggling over some question he wished to put to me. And so I, too, fell silent, knowing that was best and trusting to the darkness to give him whatever spur was needed. It must be, I was well aware, a delicate matter for him to need to weigh the pros and cons

of asking where I was concerned. At last it came. "Are you and mother estranged, Father?" he asked abruptly, yet diffidently.

"What makes you think that?" I fenced, rapidly reviewing, as was my wont at such moments, the whole matter in order to come to a quick decision.

"Well, all sorts of things, mostly little ones; but straws, I think. You don't mind my asking?"

"Have I ever minded your asking anything?"

"No. But there's one thing that's not little; something—or well—"

I helped him out. "You mean your mother and I have been occupying separate rooms for nearly two years."

"Yes. And—and—well, Father, that's just the sort of wretched thing you read about in divorce cases and I thought—I mean, there isn't anything of that going to happen, is there?"

"There certainly isn't, Alister!" I said nothing further while we covered a good two hundred yards, and he was also silent. And then my decision made, I went on. "Your mother and I have not been husband and wife except in name since we left Storhaven." He could not repress an exclamation, but he made no other comment, and I continued, "It was chiefly due to Paul's death, but not all."

"Paul's death! why should—"

"It's no pleasant story," I interrupted; "and I don't want to dwell on it, but your mother thought I let Paul drown to save you, and Paul was—was—"

"Her high hope?"

"Perhaps; I don't know if that's the right way to put it; but she loved him more than anyone else in the world, and his death was a loss nothing could make up for; I don't think anything has been quite the same again for her; and she believed I could have saved him and that I let him drown. And that ended our life as lovers. But I don't want you to misunderstand. Now that I've told you so much I'd prefer

to tell you everything. We were never really lovers, although I believe, I am sure, your mother loved me once. I liked her; I was fond of her; I was suddenly urged on by desire; and I had just been jilted in the most callous fashion by the only woman I have ever loved; her name was Barbara Grey; she was the first girl I loved and I shall die loving her; that jilting was my irreparable hurt, as Paul's death was your mother's."

"But Diana?" Alister blurted out, and then checked himself.

"Diana? the thing isn't comparable; I don't know whether one can make a hard and fast division between love and passion, but I've no doubt there is one between love and lust. But it wasn't just lust between me and Diana; I think it was something more; a passionate physical attraction, if that isn't a distinction without a difference; and yet compared with Barbara, Diana was nothing as—as—your mother was nothing. I'm sorry if I'm hurting you. Do you want me to go on? There's something else I'd like to tell you."

"Yes? I'd rather hear everything."

"It's nothing worse than I've already told you; far from it; just a mild fantasy I had; I've never told you; I'd like to tell you." He made no reply, but a mere blur as he was in the thick darkness, I felt his waiting expectancy as if I could see the expression on his face. "When you were conceived," I went on, "I had the strange fancy that it was Barbara who lay in my arms and that you were therefore Barbara's child and not your mother's. I was still, you must remember, licking the wound of my jilting and my mind was sick. And during the whole nine months of your gestation that sick mind of mine used to picture you in your mother's womb, but as Barbara's child, and as Barbara's child I used to talk to you with my thoughts and pretend you answered me with yours. Does that explain things? or help to?"

"Did Mother know about Barbara Grey?" he asked, avoiding a direct answer, for which I forbore to press him. "She knew about her," I rejoined, "from my first meeting with her.

I used to go to your mother with my boring lyrical outpourings about Barbara, and when she jilted me your mother was the only person I told and she gave me what comfort she could. And—and so—well, I needed that comfort so much and we were married. There is nothing else to tell about it. We are estranged and have been for years; more now perhaps than we've ever been. But whatever fault there is is mine. I made no great effort after we were married to keep up the pretence, and in other ways I treated her badly, leaving her alone in the evenings and neglecting her and oh, God knows! a thousand things too small and intangible to explain, but very real to a woman; very real to a man, too, for he knows well enough. But I wronged your mother from the very beginning by marrying her without being in love with her; it's the worst mistake a man can make and makes a wreck of both lives; if I'm sure of nothing else in the world, I'm sure of that."

"The trouble is to know when you *are*, isn't it?" he asked on a lighter note, to my relief and to his own, for we could now see the lights of our house not a quarter of a mile away, and neither of us wanted to face those lights until we had dispersed the atmosphere of emotional tenseness.

"Why, how d'you mean?" I asked, adopting his tone and adding a faint laugh.

"Only what I say; you see, I'm more than half in love with Penny?"

"Penny?"

"David's sister."

"Is that all you can say about it?" I laughed.

"Why, what?"

"That you're more than half in love with her?"

"I suppose so."

"You could manage to live without her, I dare say."

"Well, I'd try!" laughing; "I don't think it's as bad as all that."

"I shouldn't worry then. Mr. Justice somebody or other

said the other day that no man should live with a woman until he can't live without her, and 'live with,' we may take as the legal equivalent of being in love with, and that piece of rare judicial wisdom you can take as your answer. Here we are. And now for a hot bath, a drink and a dam' good feed, eh?"

The next evening I spent at *Green Shutters*. It was, I suppose, as far as Ferguson and I were concerned, a drunken debauch, and the only clear recollection I have of it is leaving Rachel's bed about five in the bitter morning, feeling horribly sick and with a hammering headache. I would not let her get up to make me some tea, but pulled myself together with a stiff whisky and then was nearly an hour getting the car to start; I had to fill the radiator with boiling water before I could get a kick out of it. But it was still dark when I reached The Nurseries. I let myself in and made my way up to my bedroom, imagining that no one was the wiser. I slept till noon and woke with my headache gone, but still feeling too sick to get up or to think of food. I dozed off again and slept till four, when I rang for tea, and when I finally turned out about six I was more or less ready, after a bath, to face the prospect of dinner. I remember that I did, in fact, make a surprisingly good meal; the French proverb, "The appetite comes with eating," is certainly truer than most of those specious saws.

A few days later, certainly not more than a week, May said to me, after Tessa had left the breakfast-table, "I have to go into Barneford Hospital on Monday, Richard." Her tone was so quiet, so casual, that I failed to realise what she meant and replied slowly and without interest, while feeling for my pipe and tobacco, "Oh; and what's doing there? First meeting of the Horticultural Society or the Mothers' Clinic, or what?"

"I mean as a patient."

"A what? a patient? Good Lord! What's wrong? I didn't know you'd anything the matter with you. Why didn't you tell me?"

"There wasn't much to tell; I'm not ill, or at least I don't think so; but I've not been really well for quite a time, over a year."

"How d'you mean? Pain anywhere?"

"More discomfort than pain; but I have had a good deal of pain and it's got worse lately, and Doctor Aston—"

"Why the devil didn't Aston tell me about it?" I interrupted.

"No doubt he thought you knew. And then you've been out each time he's called and you don't see very much of him now, do you?"

"That's got nothing to do with it; it was his job to tell me. But what sort of pain is it you get and where is it?"

"After meals; in the chest; it's probably only indigestion; but it doesn't yield to Dr. Aston's treatment, and the specialist advised—"

"Specialist? Good God! you seem to be half dying," I said angrily, "and I've been told nothing. When did you see this precious humbug?"

"Last Friday; I was X-rayed the week before and it appears there's some evidence of internal ulceration and so I'm going into the hospital for them to find out."

"D'you mean you're going to have an operation?"

She nodded. "Only a minor one; it's what they call an explorative operation."

"A minor one be damned! that's the lie they always tell. You're not going."

"Don't be absurd, Richard; of course I'm going; everything's arranged."

"Not into a hospital. Whatever made you think of going into one of those pauper slaughter-houses? If you've got to be explored (dam' fine word that, the butchers!), then go into

a decent nursing-home where you'll be at least treated like a human being and not an animal."

She smiled. "You don't know anything about hospitals these days. As a matter of fact, I suggested going into St. Jude's Nursing Home at Felcombe, but both the specialist who's performing the operation and Dr. Aston said they'd much prefer it to be done at Barneford and that I could rest assured I'd have every comfort. I shall have a private ward and my own nurse. Of course I'm paying for these privileges. So you can make your mind easy. I don't suppose it's anything very much, but, of course," she paused and looked at me earnestly.

"Yes?"

"Well, you see, things sometimes go wrong, and I think we ought to get the affairs of the business settled before I go in."

"Has the business anything to do with me?" I asked.

"Don't be disagreeable, please, Richard," she replied quietly; "it has a great deal to do with you."

"Well, I can't say I've noticed it. And if anything happens to you it's the children's, so I don't see where I come in at all; I'm not trying to be unpleasant, but that's the truth, isn't it?"

"The business would still need a head; more than ever then."

"I thought the admirable Rendle was the power behind the throne."

"He's nothing of the sort. But don't let's quarrel, Richard, please. Can't we discuss anything without—a—a—scene; even—even now; please, Richard."

At the pathetic note in her voice I glanced at her quickly and noticed for the first time how ill she looked. "All right, May," I said hastily; "I'm sorry; of course we'll get things settled; what do you propose if—if—those dam' fools make a mess of things?"

"Well, the business, as you say, will be the children's, but Alister will have his profession and Tessa hers, and——"

"Tessa hers! that's more news; I thought she intended to live in sweet idleness or marry young Aston or Searcle; she'll have plenty of money, anyhow; the business would fetch fifty thousand at a moderate estimate; it's probably what will happen to it, so why bother to make plans? you don't look fit to worry about business now, May, and that's the plain truth."

"I'm all right. And Tessa's been contributing odd things to a syndicate called Amalgamated Periodicals for over a year. Its chairman is Mr. Pendine, the father of Hetty Pendine who used to stay here with Tessa. Well, Hetty's now on the staff of one of the periodicals and there'll be a place for Tessa whenever she wants it; the salary won't be much, but then that won't matter. And Tessa wants to go."

"I seem to be kept pretty much in the dark about what's happening in my own family; but go on; what are you suggesting?"

"That you should remain as head of the business, either at a salary or with a share of the profits. I've not discussed it with the children, but I'm sure they'll raise no difficulties."

"H'm. I'm not so sure. If anything happens to you, May, I think it altogether likely Tessa would kick me out; I'm a pauper, y'know."

"And you think Alister would agree to that?"

"Of course I don't; but Al——"

"Then don't be silly, Richard; they would both agree to the arrangement I've suggested, and it's for you to say yes or no. Will you promise me?"

It was clear she was in no fit state for argument, and as I looked at her I realised suddenly that she was in pain, and I said hastily, "Good Lord, yes, May, of course I will; you can be quite easy about that; you ought not to be bothering about such things; you ought to be in bed? you look damnably seedy, and that's the plain truth. Now don't worry any more

about it," and I got up and was moving towards the door when she came up to me and, putting her hand upon my arm, she said gently, " You promise me, Richard?" " Of course," I replied lightly, and smiled at her. She managed a wan sort of smile in return and put her other hand upon my arm and looked up into my face. I thought she was going to kiss me, and so I patted her hands and laughed and said, " So that's that and no more worrying!" and released myself and moved away. I turned at the door; she was standing very still, her face half-averted, looking out over the bare fields. And it came to me suddenly that she was already dead.

I went up to my own private sitting-room which I had built out from my bedroom over a year before and sat down to smoke and think things over. I was barely seated when there was a knock at the door and at my call Tessa came in. I looked at her surprised, almost startled; it was the first time she had ever been in the room. " Hello!" I exclaimed jocularly, " this is an honour; d'you want anything?"

" Yes; I want to talk to you."

" Honour upon honour! find a seat and make yourself comfortable."

" I'd rather stand. What has mother been talking to you about?"

" Is that all? It's soon answered; about her illness."

" What else?"

" Well, obviously, about the business too; in case anything happens to her. And, by the bye, you might have told me she was unwell. I seem to be the only one who didn't know."

" I tell you," in so hard and suppressed a voice that I glanced at her face and found it strained, white, almost livid.

" Good God! what's biting *you*?" I said irritably.

" What's biting *me*?" she replied angrily, " What's biting *me*? Nothing; only your vileness."

I slewed my chair round so as to face her directly. " Oh, I see," I said genially. " So that's it? you want to let off steam, eh? Well, go ahead; don't mind me."

"You didn't know mother was ill," she went on, still with that suppressed voice and livid face; "of course you didn't know; you didn't care; you've never cared for anybody but yourself, you beast."

I regarded her smilingly and at this the torrent burst forth. "Beast and devil," she went on, her voice no longer suppressed, her face flushed, her eyes bright with tears; "yes, beast, beast, drunken beast and lecher; d'you think I don't know? You've ruined your own life and everyone's you've had any dealings with."

"You overestimate my powers, my dear!" I laughed; but she shouted, "Shut up, you devil, you murderer; yes, murderer; you murdered Paul and you're murdering mother by your vileness; you killed grandfather; what happened in the greenhouse to strike him down like that? tell me that, you devil; you ruined Diana's life and—"

"Oh, ho!" I put in, "that's the rub, is it?" She drew in a deep breath raspingly and put out her hands towards me, her fists clenched. "God, if I could only kill you!" she said. "You haven't the pluck, my child," I rejoined mockingly; "it'd be simple enough if you had; my gun's in the corner and it's loaded. Why don't you? I'll promise not to move; you ought to be able to score a bull at two yards." She dropped her hands and stared at me; and then her face suddenly convulsed and she turned away towards the door; but as she reached it she burst into frantic sobbing and stood with one hand to her face, the other fumbling blindly at the handle. I went over to her and put my hand upon her shoulder and was about to open the door for her when she drew herself away and cried out and struck me across the mouth with her fist and then crumpled upon the floor in a faint. I picked her up and laid her upon the big settee, flicked water into her face and forced some whisky between her teeth. She opened her eyes presently and looked at me and then turned away and hiding er face in her arms began to cry like a whipped child. I went back to my chair and

left her to her crying. Some of the words of her passionate denunciation came into my mind and I could not help thinking how foolish and futile they were and how powerless to hurt me they had been; and I remembered something I had read long ago about hate being unable to hurt with a bludgeon while love could wound to the death with a gossamer touch.

After a while her sobbing ceased and getting up and keeping her face turned from me she went out of the room without another word.

May went into Barneford Hospital on Monday afternoon and on Wednesday morning the operation was performed. Aston was present in the theatre and as soon as it was over, but before May had recovered consciousness, he came out to see me. "Everything's all right," he said; "she's borne it splendidly; she'll be round in about an hour and then you may see her. It was more serious than we'd expected."

"They always are, aren't they?"

He ignored that and went on, "She'd both gastric and duodenal ulcers; it was necessary to remove four inches of the duodenum and a portion of the stomach; as soon as she gets over the operation you'll find she'll have better health than she's had for years; she must have frequently suffered a good deal of pain to say nothing of the almost unintermittent discomfort; however, that's all over now and she'll probably make older bones than any of us. It's lucky it came now and not ten years later; sixty's a nasty age for a major operation. I must go back now. She'll be brought into the ward as soon as the dresser's finished and you can then wait until she comes round. But you'll only be allowed five minutes; you can come in late in the afternoon or this evening; we'll, of course, ring you up if you're wanted."

"If everything's *not* all right, you mean?" I said ironically.

He nodded, gave me a quick odd glance and went out.

They brought May in presently and I sat beside the bed until she recovered consciousness. She opened her eyes, stared a little blankly at me for a long moment and then smiled greyly and put out her hand which I took in between mine and held. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Fine," she whispered; "a little sick but it's nothing. What—what—have they done?"

"Oh—er—Aston will tell you that; I've seen him and it's been a huge success, he says, and you'll probably live to be a hundred."

Again the grey smile passed over her face. "Poor Richard," she said gently, as if following out her own train of thought rather than answering me. She held up her other hand and I saw a nurse hurrying towards us. "I'm going to be sick, Richard," she said; "perhaps you'd better"—and she released her hand from between mine as the nurse came between us. "Best leave her now, sir," she said rapidly; "you can come in later."

I went back to The Nurseries and mooned about watching the men at work for an hour or so and then went up to my room to read. I took down from one of the shelves the manuscript anthology I had compiled for Alister and turned over the pages, here and there pausing to read things that caught my eye. Whether my mood seemed unconsciously to determine my apparently haphazard choice or whether it was pure coincidence I don't know, but my glance again and again fell upon prose extracts beautiful enough but in my present mood singularly depressing. "Naked I came on earth and naked I depart under earth, and why do I vainly labour seeing the naked end?" And again, "Mortal is what belongs to mortals, and all things pass by us; and if not, yet we pass by them." And "Be young, dear my soul; soon will others be men, and I being dead shall be dark earth." I closed the book hastily and put it aside and sat smoking, my mind teeming with those thoughts which hover evasively just beyond the verges of one's immediate mental reach in those moments

when one is too tired to make the effort to stretch out and capture them.

I rang for tea soon after four and just before five I set off again for Barneford. May seemed very much better and her smile was bright and welcoming when I entered. But she was very sleepy, not wanting to talk and content just to lie and hold one of my hands in hers. And after a while she fell asleep and the nurse tiptoed up and whispered that I had better go as soon as I could without disturbing her. And presently her hands relaxing I withdrew mine gently and went away.

But when I came the next morning about ten everything had changed. She had had a haemorrhage just before dawn; the specialist had been hurriedly summoned and there was some talk of a further operation being necessary. I was told that I could not stay more than ten minutes. I expected to find her barely conscious and was surprised how brightly she greeted me despite her obvious weakness.

I sat down and she took my hands and pressed them against her cheek. "Richard," she said quietly, "I'm not going to get better. Hush, no!" she went on, as I was about to speak. "Listen; I want to—to—tell you so—so much. Put your head beside me on the pillow." I knelt down and did as she asked and she began to stroke my face and put her fingers through my hair. "I'm so sorry things went as they did with us, Richard," she whispered; "I'm so sorry for many of the things I've done and said but—but I've always loved you. I—I didn't mean that about Paul; say you forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, May," I said, stroking her hair; "I've forgotten it all long ago." And as I spoke I wondered how I could feel so unmoved at this pitiful pleading and I could not hide from myself the fact, nor did I attempt to do so, that her death would leave me equally unmoved.

"You don't believe in a hereafter, Richard," she went on, her lips against my cheek; "I wish you did; I do; I know it and I shall meet Paul; Paul, my—my—" the lines of her face

broke up and her mouth trembled. She regained her control and said softly, "If you'd loved me, Richard, perhaps," and then, as if she had forgotten what she was going to say, she continued, "I did not grudge you your happiness with Diana; I was glad for you." She was quiet for a while and then she said earnestly, "Don't marry that woman."

"That woman?" I said, startled, raising my head from the pillow.

"Don't marry Rachel," she said, her eyes looking into mine with an indescribable tenderness, "she'll not—not make you happy—make you a good wife—as—as I've tried to be to you." She closed her eyes and her breath became rapid. To my great relief I saw the nurse enter the room, and as she came up to the bed May opened her eyes and smiled at me and whispered, "You'll come again soon; say good-bye now." I bent over her and kissed her lips and then her forehead, and felt myself drained of all emotion, save a faint, dull, half-pitying aversion.

I came back to the hospital again in the afternoon. May was asleep and they would not wake her. That was what they told me, but I guessed that she had been drugged. Aston told me that she was certainly no worse and that no decision could be made for at least two or three days, and advised me to go home and get some sleep. "We'll ring you if you're wanted," he said; "but nothing's likely to happen, I assure you. Come along in the morning."

He rang me up at midnight, but when I reached the hospital shortly before one o'clock May was dead.

Tessa, who had slept in Barneford since Monday, was with her when she died, but Alister who, by his mother's express injunction, had been told nothing about the operation, and had spent that Thursday evening in a friend's rooms in another college, did not get Tessa's telegram until ten o'clock, and although he set off at once by car and covered the two hundred and forty miles in a little over five hours he was, of course, too late. The three of us met at an early breakfast at

the Astons' shortly after seven; we were alone together, and in recollection it comes back to me as the most desolating meal I have ever eaten or, rather, tried to eat; Tessa ignored me entirely, except for occasional glances of the most malignant hatred, while I had an uneasy feeling that Alister, who seemed withdrawn from me, remote, inaccessible, unhappy, was blaming me for not letting him know of his mother's illness. I never knew whether that wretched feeling of mine had any grounds for its existence and for the first time in our life together I was unwilling, afraid, ashamed to ask; I felt that my small defence that it was against May's wishes for him to be told was no defence at all in the light of the fact that in the end it was Tessa and not I who had wired to him; how could I have told him the simple if incredible truth that it did not occur to me to wire him? If I could have pretended that I was so distraught by his mother's danger that there was room for nothing else in my mind I might have essayed that incredible truth; but the lie, I knew, would have choked me, and he would have known it for what it was.

The first clause in May's will was a wish that she should be buried beside Paul in Storhaven churchyard, and it was this which, a day later, provoked Tessa's outburst as soon as Harvey, the Felcombe solicitor, had left the three of us together in my sitting-room; but if it had not been that, anything else would have served for the hatred of years was struggling in her for outlet and nothing could hold it back.

"Of course your mother wanted to be buried at Storhaven," I said, folding and unfolding the will and staring out of the window without seeing anything, my mind almost completely blank; "and yet I never thought of it. I'll attend to all that."

"*You'll* attend to it?" Tessa said, in a voice so rasping, so charged with venom, that Alister gave her a startled glance; "and what have *you* to do with mother's body? I will see she is laid to rest where she wished to be."

"Very well, Tessa," I said quietly; "I'm sure she would like that best." She made no reply, nor did she look at me,

and I went on, "We'd best get the—the other matter settled and done with. As you know, the business is Alister's and yours, and although your mother expresses the hope that I shall remain here in my present post there is no legal obligation about it. And the financial aspect has been altered by the six thousand pounds your mother has left me and which she had apparently saved for that purpose since your grandfather died. And so if you would rather——"

"Please, Father, don't talk like that," Alister broke in unhappily, "and for God's sake don't let us quarrel now. Of course you'll——"

"Wait a minute," Tessa said harshly. "I'm going to say what I've got to say." She turned on me and thrust at me with her hand, "There's more than six thousand pounds due to you; the business owes you twelve thousand for the Carner thing you invented; you shall have it; take it and clear out, and take your whore with you."

I saw Alister's face whiten; he thrust back his chair and stood up, crying, "No! no! my God, Tessa!" and then he put up his hands to his head and turned away and strode over to the window and stood there a long while with his back to us. No one spoke, Tessa sat leaning forward, her one hand still out-thrust towards me, her eyes blazing, her mouth a bitter line. Presently Alister turned round and came back to his chair and said quietly, "Have you done, Tessa?" She made no reply, and he went on slowly, addressing himself to me, his tone dull and listless, "I hope what I'm going to propose, Father, will be acceptable. I would like, we would like——"

"Leave me out," said Tessa.

"I would like you to remain here as the head of the business, Father. If you won't, then it had better be sold as far as I'm concerned; I've other things to do in the world, and unless Tessa stays to look after things——"

Again Tessa interrupted. "When I leave here with mother's body," she said, her voice suddenly flat, dreary, "I leave for

good. I'm going to live in London, and as for the business, I don't care what happens to it nor do I want a penny out of it. Let him have it all and drink himself to death."

"That's enough, Tessa," Alister said sharply, his face flushing; "I've stood about enough; more than enough; I can stand no more. You must please yourself what you do; I'm talking to father now and I'll ask you not to interrupt." He turned towards me again and said, "*I want you, then, to stay on, Father, and I propose that we share the profits on an equal basis, thirty-three-and-a-third per cent. each. If Tessa does not choose to take her third it will be banked in her name; as for my share, it can be paid into my account; I don't think I shall need it, or much of it; but it will be there when I want it. It'll be a new partnership; the legal side can be settled later; will you accept that, Father?*" His glance held my own for a moment and at my nod he held out his hand to me, grasped mine and then, getting up, went quickly out of the room; a moment or two later Tessa, without looking towards me, followed him.

Once or twice during the next twenty-four hours I heard her voice about the house, or caught a glimpse of her in the garden or passing from room to room; and then she left for Storhaven with May's body. I was never again to hear her voice nor to see her, although in the near future I was to receive a letter from her, one she might have spared herself the trouble of writing; the fool, the little fool; did she think she had power to hurt me?

CHAPTER XIV

ALISTER STATES A CASE

THE business was turned into a company under the name of Carden Limited; Rendle was appointed General Manager with the option of retaining his old salary and percentage or receiving £1000 a year without a percentage; he chose the latter and suggested his old post should be given to the foreman, Ben Fitton, a very capable middle-aged Yorkshireman who had come to us some seven years previously to give some specialised instructions on manuring and fertilisers; he had come for three months only but Uncle Fred had liked him and offered him a post and he had sent for his wife and family (Frank, then a boy of twelve and Ann, a girl of fourteen) and had settled down at Boughton. This suggestion I accepted and with two such sound men as Rendle and Fitton in charge there seemed every prospect of the business increasing in prosperity.

I was now nominally the head of the whole business and, by Alister's express wish, I had sole control and could decide on any course of action which seemed desirable without consulting him. As it happened I never found it necessary to come to any decision or even to consider minor changes, for in the hands of Rendle and Fitton the business ran on oiled wheels and the first year's profits of the new company were to show an increase of nearly thirty per cent. over our previous best year.

With Alister at Cambridge, Tessa in London and May dead, the house was a gloomy and haunted place and I spent but little time there; there was no week when I did not pass at least three nights at *Green-Shutters* and occasionally I did not return to The Nurseries for many days on end. I am

sure if it had not been for Rachel, who now more and more possessed me, I should have asked Alister to release me from my promise and given up my post. Not that it was anything other than a sinecure, nor did I allow it to interfere in any way with my amusements. "Amusements" is somewhat of a mockery, for my general mental condition at that time was one of profound depression, exacerbated by heavy drinking and its only mitigation the satisfying of my passion for Rachel. I was now completely the slave of her body as she was, I believe, of mine.

May's revelation of her knowledge of the affair had startled me but when I told Rachel (it may be imagined that I did not tell her all) she merely laughed and said mockingly, "Of course; it would have been odd if someone hadn't told her; why, half the countryside have been mouthing it over since the new year; you'll be wondering if Jamie knows next!"

That this was true enough I had the best of reasons for believing for I could not blind my eyes to the meaning glances directed at me not only in Boughton but in villages many miles afield; and now that May was dead the tongue of gossip made small efforts to prevent itself coming to my ears. Not that I cared; there was now no one in all the world save Alister to whom I felt myself answerable for my actions; and there, indeed, was the sore which gave me no rest. I was wretchedly aware that he must know everything and that he must know too that I fully realised this; I had an unbearable longing to put the blunt question and to tell him all and I read his letters hoping he would take the first step which would allow me to unburden myself; but he did not make that step and I could not bring myself to make the disclosure which would at least have brought me some measure of peace.

But the disclosure had presently to be made although on a somewhat different footing. I asked Rachel to marry me; and exactly six months to a day after May's death she came to

the house at Boughton as its legal mistress. That certainly gave the countryside something to talk about, but ironically, yet commonly enough, once the marriage had taken place the gossip, after an immediate febrile flare-up, subsided rapidly and as husband and wife the cloak of that condition's immemorial respectability was extended to cover us with its almost illimitable folds; the accomplished fact once again demonstrated its tremendous power; Rachel and I were no longer a titbit for scabrous tongues; we were merely Mr. and Mrs. Carden and with, however, much secret disapproval we were openly accepted. And, doubtless the most significant and salient fact, it must not be forgotten that I was the head of the most prosperous concern in the county and as such a potential source of revenue which few in the countryside could afford to ignore; it was not without bitterness that I realised how this financial aspect of the matter palsied the hands that might have flung mud and stones and filth.

Yet strong as that ally was it had no weapons to serve me in respect of the only person alive, other than Rachel, who had power to wound me; and even Rachel's power was but a twig which flicks the face compared with a knife twisted in the heart. Was there anything I could say to Alister, short of the naked truth, my insatiable lust for Rachel, which could balance in his eyes the stark fact that his mother was but six months dead and now my whore (for how could he help remembering that word flung into my face by Tessa?) filled her place?

And yet lust was not all the truth; and my determination in this chronicle to put forward no excuses in extenuation of the things I have done need not be allowed to blacken the picture beyond its deserts; the devil is traditionally allowed his advocate; it was not, I say, then, all lust. At a time when I was lonely, depressed, humiliated and without friends (whom I had I admit neglected or driven from me) I found at *Green Shutters* just what? a warm welcome that was always the same, and one that was utterly without criticism;

it may be appreciated how much this last meant to me who was then living in a domestic circle whose periphery was indifference and whose central point was stark hatred. What did it matter to me that Jamie Ferguson's welcome was merely for someone to booze with and Rachel's dictated by nothing higher than a craving of the flesh? It was the welcome that counted; Rachel's arms round my neck, her kiss on my mouth, her laugh and her, "Fine! I thought you were never coming;" Jamie's mocking grimace, the reek of his pipe and his, "come in with you man! the whisky's waitin'"; there was even in Nellie Byre's pertly understanding glance and her parrot-like "aw! m' be," that quality of friendliness, of being wanted, of being accepted without comment just for myself, which was then so sweet a balm to my wounds—my self-inflicted wounds, if you will.

So it was not all lust that brought Rachel to my bed; there was gratitude in it and thanks and friendliness and the recollection of happy if roistering and debauched hours which had helped me through a bad time. I was a fool not to have told Alister all this; I know that now; he would have been ready enough to make allowances for there is in youth, side by side with a bitter intolerance, a wide charity unknown to maturity; or should I say dead in maturity; having died with that warm and lovely idealism from which it derives.

I know that now, I say; but even then I felt it; half-knew it by a sort of intuition; but I feared to put that intuition to the test and so I merely wrote a brief note to Alister saying that I was married. It was the long vacation but he had not yet come home and was holiday-making with young Moxon and Penelope in the Lake District. And he replied as briefly, his sole comment being, "Your news rather surprised me, Father;" that was all and the rest of his letter consisted of descriptions of their excursions, interlarded with praise of his companions; of the girl, indeed, so much that I realised his phrase, during our talk of a year or so previously, "I'm

half in love with Penny" was more akin to that quaint figure of speech known as meiosis than to actual fact.

But if Alister refrained from comment Tessa adjusted the balance, and without the excuse that I had written to tell her of my marriage. It did not surprise me that she knew, there were plenty eager enough to tell her. I destroyed her letter when I had read it and but little now of its wild denunciation remains in my memory; a sentence or so, a phrase or two, almost comic in their fury and intolerance; and that is all; one of them was, "it is men like you who make belief in the Roman Catholic hell not only possible but inevitable because so utterly desirable"—an effort which almost moved me to write to her pointing out that so slip-shod and woolly a sentence did not augur very well for her success in her chosen profession.

From Alister's reply I should have been prepared for the letter he wrote to me about three weeks later; but I suppose one is never prepared for the obvious and I was hurt by his news that he was not coming home but that he and David and Penelope were going to Bordeaux and from there were going tramping. I was hurt and foolishly angry, making no allowances for him in the heat of that first resentment; and it was some days before I could consider the matter coolly enough to realise that it was not only much the best thing for him to do but that it was for all concerned the best way out of an embarrassing situation. But there was in that letter another piece of news, far more important and significant and to me far more disturbing, and I am sure that it was this and not the other relatively unimportant matter which was at the root of my mortification, although I would not face that fact and resolutely thrust it away; it was indeed a devastating piece of news, so incomprehensible, so utterly unexpected, that it came upon me with something of the immediate numbing effect of a mortal wound. It was at the end of his letter; just a bare statement; let me give it in his own words; "I have definitely decided, Father, to give up the study of medi-

cine and to take Holy Orders." That was all. But it was not the brevity of casualness or thoughtlessness but of long cogitation and I am sure I realised this before I noticed that a postscript had been added after the letter had been folded, probably after the envelope had been sealed, for as the writing crossed each fold its letter was misshapen. "When we meet," the postscript ran, "we will have a long talk about it." Plain evidence of much deep thought, not only before the letter was written but afterwards and the "it" was additional evidence; so intensely aware was he of the tremendous import of that item of news and how it dwarfed everything else in the letter that it did not occur to him to explain to what his "it" referred; nor, I will add, did I need any such explanation.

But that long talk, not so very long after all, did not come until he had left Cambridge and been ordained and had, moreover, become engaged to Penelope Moxon; that engagement was indeed the occasion which led to an opportunity for our talk. How strangely that reads "an opportunity for our talk"; yet in that phrase of five words is packed all the essential significant truth of three years of our lives. And that truth was what? Let me relate one small incident, the trouble over Ann Fitton; it will perhaps make clear what I have no wish to tell in detail but what is implied in the fact that only once in those three years between my marriage with Rachel and his ordination did Alister come to his home; and then he had no chance to talk with me for I was I admit in no condition for reasonable discussion; oh, I was well enough and wide awake; it was not that; nor was I lacking in speech; it was not that; far from it; I was loud, boisterous, loquacious, drunkenly voluble; flippant, facetious, laughing riotously; and sunk in a very pit of mortified degradation.

And once I had gone to see him at Peterhouse and again was in no condition for serious talk.

When Ben Fitton came to us first he had, as I have said, a boy, Frank, aged twelve and a daughter, Ann, then fourteen. Frank was a sedate, solemn youngster of the efficient hard-working stamp of his father; Ann was a slim, dark, wild, defiant little thing, like no one except her pretty self; she certainly derived nothing from her father and little enough that could be seen from her mother, who was a big, angular, handsome blonde with a passion for cooking and church-going—attributes that are not too often coupled. Ben Fitton was clearly disturbed and puzzled over this odd, wild, lovely (yes, lovely she was, I suppose) young thing that had been born, by some queer freak, of two such sturdy plain commonsensical stocks as his and his wife's; disturbed and puzzled and made watchful; his fondness for her was almost painfully, certainly ridiculously plain; and she held his heart (and her mother's too for that matter) casually, carelessly in the hollow of one very pretty small and usually grubby hand; grubby-handed at fourteen! odd for a girl; well, Ann was an oddity, with a touch of the gipsy in her and more than a trace of the slut. I imagine that Ben and his wife had begun their training of her in the good old way, the way they used successfully enough with Frank; kind but firm and a soundly slapped bottom for disobedience; but they'd found it didn't pay with her; it's not a dose that fits all cases of wayward childhood; it certainly didn't fit Ann's and they'd wisely abandoned it. Wisely, in the light of after events? I believe so; what after all was it but her immense vitality, her passion for living, her joy in beauty, the riot in her blood? beatings would have driven it all underground and poisoned her springs of life; as it was she merely did as she had always done, expressed in her action the tumult of the warm full tide that flowed in her.

As she slipped out of adolescence into womanhood she toned down somewhat; or learnt a measure of restraint; a small measure; apothecary's measure; but it seemed a good deal when her previous wildness was considered. And so, I

fancy her father and mother thought that age had brought balance, poise, control, discretion and a dozen other virtues; from wine to water; so much better for one's health and well-being; but how damnable flat compared with the cup "that clears to-day of past regrets and future fears." And so, I suspect, Ben the watchdog relaxed something of his fussing. And Ann very joyously and gaily became pregnant. She was then twenty-two and cannot therefore be accused of precipitancy.

The hullabaloo pierced even the thick blanket of drunkenness and lust I had wrapped about myself; not merely, you will understand, because my working manager's pretty young daughter had been seduced, if seduced be the right word for the plunge she took, I imagine, so zestfully; no, indeed! it was not because of the seduced that the affair demanded my attention but the seducer! No other than dour, grim, super-efficient John Rendle. Her guilty secret wrung out of her? By no means; she was frankness itself; Ben told me she laughed and said, "Why, he offered to marry me but I slapped his face; he's older than you are, Daddy." Regret, shame? well, it wasn't noticeable. And Rendle? That was chiefly where the hullabaloo occurred for he denied it furiously and with a spate of violent speech that the occasion must have miraculously dredged up from some well of unconsciousness hitherto sealed. An extremely embarrassing position as between a general manager and his second-in-command; one calling for tact, diplomacy and, well, arrangement. Ben Fitton's Yorkshire blood had none of that sort of anaemic stuff in it; he believed Ann; he threatened Rendle; brought an affiliation summons against him and when the local magistrates dismissed it he thrashed Rendle (it was more of a fight than a thrashing and must have been worth seeing) and was sacked.

It was at this point that, much against my will and inclination, I was brought into the affair. Fitton appealed to me after his sacking. He came into my sitting-room fresh from

his fight with a badly contused eye and cut swollen lips, and dropped his bombshell. Bear in mind that was the first I had heard of the matter—seduction, pregnancy, birth, affiliation-summons, had all passed me by; there are in that incredible statements soundings of the pit into which I had fallen. I heard him out; believed him; told him to take no notice of his dismissal and that I would see to it, even if it meant sacking Rendle; I wonder even now if he guessed with what joy I grasped such a weapon with which to smite that insolent super-efficient hound!

I might have defeated Rendle had it been merely a fight between the two of us but I found he had an ally before whom my strength turned to water. The fight, indeed, never took place; I surrendered before it began.

I lay in bed that night watching Rachel, who was sitting at her dressing-table smoking a cigarette and massaging her face, neck and breasts with the pet skin-food of the moment. Although by now I knew her fine body better than I did my own the infinite variety of her naked beauty never staled, and the picture she made there under the amber light above her head forged and tempered in that swift instant one more link to the chain of the flesh which bound me to her; and as she turned a little sideways, raising one arm above her head, and the soft light made of her breasts a miracle of lovely curves and shadows I was shaken by sudden desire as hungry and urgent as if it were my first sight of her thus and I a man long-starved.

"You knew about Ann Fitton's brat?" I asked.

"Who didn't?"

"Well, I didn't; I think you might have told me."

"I'm sure I did; you must 've forgotten; and anyhow where were your eyes the last few months? the little slut was as pot-bellied as a pup with scours."

"I'd other things to look at."

"Just as well."

"Pity Rendle hadn't."

She turned round quickly. " You don't believe that dam' lie, do you?"

" Well, I'm afraid I do," I replied, surprised at the warmth of her tone.

" Then don't. If you don't know Rendle better than that, I do; he had no more to do with the little bitch than you did. Seduced? it makes me sick; why the little slut has been ripe for any man's picking as long as I've known her and has no doubt been picked a hundred times. I don't suppose she's the ghost of a notion who the child's father is; so with admirable business alertness she picks on Rendle. And her father, true to his county, backs her up. And Rendle thrashed him and then sacked him; a good day's work well done, I should say."

" I don't agree. I think Rendle's as likely to be the man as any one else. But that isn't the point."

" No? Well, what is?" she asked; and there was a mocking, almost contemptuous quality in her voice which I had heard a thousand times but never before, or so it seemed to me then, when she was speaking to me. She had finished at the dressing-table now and slipping her flimsy night-dress over her head she came over to the bed and as she got in beside me she repeated, " Well, what is? But don't let's have an all-night sitting for I'm half asleep already."

" The point," I went on resentfully, " is that Ben Fitton's much too good a man to lose. Even if he were in the wrong," I added irritably.

" Well, he is in the wrong on all counts; and even if he weren't over the girl he sacked himself automatically when he hit Rendle. Don't be stupid; go to sleep and leave it to Rendle; he'll find a better man than Fitton and we'll be well shot of the whole brood."

" I'll be damned if I do!" I said angrily; " Fitton's not going; the last word's mine; I'd sooner see Rendle go."

" I daresay," and again the contemptuous mockery was so

plain that I sat up and put my hand upon her shoulder and said, "Why, what the devil do you mean, Rachel?"

"Nothing; lie down; are we going to argue all night over that little slut's escapades? Don't be a fool, Richard." She put an arm about me and drew me down beside her.

"You've said yourself you knew nothing about the matter; well, I do, and I tell you Rendle's as innocent as you are, you're a fool to believe anything else and if you quarrel with Rendle you'll be a bigger one. Now, are you satisfied?"

"I'm hanged——"

"Don't you believe me?"

"Of course I believe you, Rachel; but it's not a matter——"

She interrupted me with a laugh and put her mouth on mine and drew me closer, her hand moving slowly and caressingly over my body; and forthwith I abandoned my championship of the Fittons and left Rendle to his victory.

It was in Rachel's arms an easy thing to do; it presented a different aspect on the morrow when my promise to Fitton fell to be honoured. It was already dishonoured, but there remained the unpleasant task of meeting him; I had no stomach for it and dodged it cravenly by leaving a note for him in which I said that I had reconsidered my opinion and that I now thought it would be better for all parties if he went. I softened the blow by enclosing a testimonial and a cheque for a year's salary. The Fittons left before the week was out and a day or so later I had a letter from Ben Fitton returning my cheque which, he said, he didn't want. He thanked me for my testimonial and told me he was going back to his old employer, Sankey, of Huddersfield. The letter ended on a note of what in anyone else would have seemed impertinence, or worse, but there was none of that weakness in Ben Fitton's solid make-up; and there was in consequence no offence in the shrewd gross touch which was so characteristic of his bluntness: "I am not blaming you at all, sir; you didn't know anything about it and were led astray and not by the nose neither."

When Alister had been ordained after leaving Cambridge he had been appointed to a curacy at St. James's Church, Bow. He had wanted to work in the East End of London, but it seemed to me an odd coincidence that his first church should be within a mile and a half of Angel Lane. Before taking up his post he and Penelope Moxon had, as I have said, become engaged and to signalise that happy event had gone off together to Portscatho in South Cornwall for a six weeks' holiday. It was while there that he wrote to me suggesting I should come and spend a week or two with them. My memory is rather uncertain over the Fitton affair but it certainly took place several months, probably nearly a year, before that holiday of Alister's and Penelope's. No mention was made in the letter of Rachel accompanying me and I was well aware the omission was intentional; it meant, I knew, that I went alone or not at all. I did not want to leave Rachel but I did want very much indeed to spend some time with Alister. To say we had drifted apart would be untrue; we corresponded frequently and his letters were as warm and intimate and frank as in the old days; nevertheless something had gone out of our association, something that was not to be ascribed to his manhood or to his many other interests or even to his love for Penelope but indubitably, and only too well did I realise it, to the degrading condition into which I had fallen; two things possessed me entirely, drink and my lust for Rachel, and if I had any other immediate interest it was the occasional evenings, alone or accompanied by Rachel, which I spent with Jamie Ferguson. Debauched, acid-tongued and bad-tempered old reprobate as he was, I liked him; it was, indeed, more than a mere liking; I found in his company, in his manner, in his cynical estimate of life, something which at that wretched period was in some queer fashion inexplicably soothing; no, I do not think "soothing" is the right word; comforting is perhaps nearer; but it was more than that; I cannot find the apt word, the fitting phrase; it was almost as if in his company, especially when Rachel

was not there, I was able not exactly to justify myself in my own eyes, but at least to feel that it was against circumstance and not against myself that I fought my losing battle; and so I was in some slight fashion able to rehabilitate myself if only in a sort of make-belief. Especially, as I say, when Rachel was not there; how significant that is to me now, and how blind I was then to that significance, as well as to other and bitterer things. And yet was I entirely blind, at least, to the part Rachel was playing in my life? Not utterly perhaps or I should never have accepted Alister's invitation, never have torn myself away from her; there must have been somewhere in my consciousness a faint realisation how good it would be for me to get away for a time, to put myself again in touch with the benignant influence of my son, to draw close to his warmth, to barricade myself against myself within the shelter of his young idealism, his fineness, his cleanliness. All that surely must have played some part in my decision. I mentioned the invitation, not without considerable hesitation, to Rachel and expected some scoffing comment; for already she referred to him with a touch of mockery as the young parson. Her reception of the news surprised me and, weak and pitiful fool that I was, almost decided me to abandon the project. "The very thing," she said; "you've looked in need of a holiday for a long time as I've told you a dozen times. And why only two weeks? Two months wouldn't be too much; and if you're thinking about the business it's in good hands and would run along as capitally as ever if you were away a year."

"I wasn't thinking about the business," I rejoined; "it would take no harm if I never saw it again."

"I won't flatter you," she laughed; "I don't think it would. But what were you thinking about?"

"Well," forcing a smile, "I'm only asked for a week or two and—and—apart from that—er—you don't mind my going, do you?" I ended lamely.

"Don't talk bosh," she replied lightly; "don't you know

by now I'm never mum about the things I object to? I'm glad to think you'll have the chance of spending an enjoyable holiday with Alister." And then she added with that mockery that was rarely absent from her voice when she referred to him, "and with the fortunate chit he's honoured with his choice. Take a holiday and have a real old family-gossiping time and don't be so daft as to rush back until your welcome's worn thin. Is that all serene now?" smiling into my eyes with that wanton look so characteristic of her and which her father said jeeringly she could not help turning even upon a cold boiled cod.

"That's all right, Rachel," I replied; "but you'll let me know how things are going?"

"I'll let you know as much as is good for you," she chaffed; "and now give me a light and run away and pack."

I spent three weeks with Alister and Penelope at Portscatho, for they prolonged their stay by a week for my benefit. It was three weeks of complete spiritual contentment; I see it now in recollection through that same sort of glamorous mist which surrounds, in a child's eyes, some golden summer holiday; it renewed life in me and hope and, dearer still, it showed me that the bond between me and Alister, which I had feared weakening, breaking, was as strong as ever. Penny was a delightful little girl but even then she was scarcely more than a shadow, a bright and vivid shadow, if such a phrase be allowable, that walked beside us, and now I am unable to remember with any clearness what she was like; I still have an impression of slimness and daintiness and of very ready and attractive laughter but that is all; Alister occupies both forefront and background of that holiday; there were no lees in the cup I drank then; no premonitory clouds, no menace of darkness. The dull folly of clods who would peer into the future! How those three weeks would have been poisoned could I have known that nearly seven years were to pass before I was again to taste something

of the happiness of those days; that I was to drink long of bitter waters before coming again to any promised land; before coming, indeed, within sight of its boundaries; a land of promise but of promise unfulfilled; a land where before I turned my back upon it for ever I knew there had never been and never could be a dwelling-place for me.

The day before our holiday ended Penelope persuaded (ordered is the better word) Alister and me to set off after luncheon for a long walk, so that she might enjoy an orgy of packing. Alister was a careless packer, I even worse; Penny had a passion for seeing everything snug in its place and moreover she liked packing, especially with odd cups of tea and occasional cigarettes at those not infrequent moments when she straightened her back and sat down to survey progress. We were instructed not to return until seven o'clock, which would leave us time for that hot bath, shower and drink which to me was the best part of a tramp.

We set off shortly after two, climbing the steep badly-surfaced declivity of Gerrans Hill up which thrice daily the red motor 'bus to Truro snorted and groaned. It was a fine day, warm even for that warmest spot in the kingdom. Our walk could scarcely be called a tramp and was more in the nature of a pleasant saunter, so that it was after four by the time we reached Veryan, that queer one-street village with at each end a perfectly circular cottage surmounted by a crucifix; these two cottages were built, according to the local story, to keep the devil out of Veryan; but neighbouring villages embroider the tale by insisting that the day the crucifixes were erected the devil happened to be in Veryan, a favourite pasture of his, and has since never been able to get out. The old woman in the rose-covered cottage next to the inn, who gave us tea, told the story smilingly and as I looked out through the window at the pleasant vista of trees and gardens and small thatched cottages and recollect ed several extremely pretty dark girls we had passed on our way up the street,

I remarked that the old gentleman's imprisonment struck me as being no great hardship for one of his undoubted powers of fascination, especially where young and pretty maids were concerned. The old woman shook her head; she seemed not quite sure of my meaning but clutched at something apparently familiar. "I don't hold with that, now, sir," she said, with a dry, pursed-up little smile; "boys for girls and old men for old women, I say. There was George Hawker over by Port Loe married last month and he eighty and the maid a slip of seventeen; disgraceful I call it."

Alister laughed. "We're going on to Port Loe," he said; "perhaps we'll see the happy pair; where're we likely to find them?"

"That you won't, sir; that you won't," she replied, "for George Hawker died in July month and Lily went back to her father's in Portholland and Fred Trevethick is courting her now."

"And how old is Fred?" I asked; "ninety?"

"That he is not, sir," she laughed; "twenty an' no more; boy to her girl, God bless them!"

As we left the old woman's cottage I said to Alister, "We'll not be back by seven at this rate; Port Loe's a good four miles."

"Then we'll get a car back. Somebody or other 'll have an antediluvian chariot in the village."

"Driving back 'll spoil my bath," I said; "I like getting back in a sweat. Can't we get a car here, and then walk back from Port Loe."

"If the devil allows such things in Veryan," Alister laughed. "We'll try, anyhow." There was not a car to be hired in Veryan, but the driver of a Ford baker's van offered to give us a lift there if we didn't mind a squeeze beside him. He proved a genial companion, if a hair-raising driver; and we were into Port Loe by ten minutes past five. He remains in my memory because of the difficulty we had to persuade him to accept any payment for his kindness and for a re-

mark he made about the village in reply to a question of Alister's. "Live in Port Loe?" he laughed; "no, sir, I don't; I wouldn't for quids; it's no place for anyone to live in who's not Cornish bred and I'm Kent, born at Herne; it's a rum place is Port Loe, a sight more foreign than Calais or Boulogne and I've been to them often on trips; and it's not only foreign; it's a dark place is Port Loe, I give you my word; funny things been done there in the past, I wouldn't mind betting."

"Smuggling?" I asked.

"Smuggling! there's smuggling all over Cornwall an' always will be. No; sort of—of—sinister things I mean, if you take me. Oh, it's all right now, I daresay; nice little place for a holiday, an' all that; but you'll make no friends in Port Loe; you won't get a smile even out o' the kids, nor a wag of a dog's tail; an' as for picking up a girl, by Gosh! you try it!" with a look at Alister. "They do say," he went on, "that the girls won't even marry outside the village and it's been like that since the year dot and now everybody in the blinkin' place is either a Ted Jago, a Ben Craig or a George Trevlyan. Well, here we are; pretty little place, isn't it? if you like that sort o' thing; give me Margate!"

We walked down to the small harbour shut in by rocky cliffs high enough to hide the sun at that hour. We dropped down upon a shelf of rock and sat smoking and watching a few fishermen busy with their tackle below us; they did not cast so much as a glance in our direction and their talk uninterrupted by our presence drifted up to us in a low rumble. Despite the absence of the sun it was very warm and pleasant there. I felt extraordinarily happy and content; spiritually and bodily soothed and Alister too seemed equally under a benign influence which gave the lie to the Ford driver's dark hints. And presently, as we leaned back and smoked our pipes, we drifted into the sort of light confidential chatting which seems inevitably to accompany such idle occasions. Alister had just discovered a tobacco which he swore was

the best in the world. "It's Baron Mixturf," he said, offering me his pouch.

But I smiled and shook my head, "Bound to bite my tongue after dark flake," I said drowsily; "all mixtures do."

"It won't. Most mixtures do, I know; that's the curse of pipe-smoking."

"You should carry two pipes at least," I replied, "and smoke 'em in turn. It'll save you a lot of sore tongues." And with that our talk slipped slowly into a sort of catalogue of small tips and bits of wisdom calculated to make the lesser wheels of life run the easier. My list was, I suppose, naturally the longer one, including cold water for shaving, the care of razors and guns, the prevention of sore feet when tramping and my pet one of avoiding ear-ache after swimming by refraining from blowing the nose for at least half an hour.

"But, hang it all, Father!" Alister laughed, "you must do something with a nose after bathing."

"Of course; wipe it; but on your life don't blow."

I remember Alister wired in with an odd theory about baldness. "D'you know," he asked, "why you've a bald patch and I'll never have one?"

"You will, my son," I smiled. "It's a family heirloom."

"Nonsense! Men go bald because they crop their hair close and that allows their hats and caps to chafe their crowns and chafing is death to hair. Now, I wear mine like Absalom's and in consequence shall never go bald. Women don't, you know."

"Well, most of them don't, I admit," I replied; "but what will your good vicar say about your mop?" And with that question, relevant as it was and following quite logically from the previous conversation, the atmosphere of light-hearted gossip changed to one of serious discussion.

"The Reverend Charles Hayter?" smiled Alister; "Oh, nothing, I should say; he doesn't strike me as the sort of man to notice such mundane things as mops." He was

silent for a long moment and then he said quietly, "You're not quite happy over my job, Father?"

"If you're happy I'm pleased," I fenced; "and that's all that need be said."

"I don't think it is," he replied; "you're disappointed; why?"

I felt there was now no avoiding it and plunged ahead. "Well, all right, Alister," I said bluntly; "I suppose I am; a slum curacy seems a small end for the brilliant scholastic career you've had."

"End!" he rejoined; "it's only the beginning. And I'm becoming quite a famous religious controversialist." At my blank look he smiled and went on, "It's your fault you know nothing about it; you read nothing these days except *The Sporting and Dramatic Times*. If you were the cultured country gentleman you ought to be you'd know I've had two articles in *The Spectator* last May, one in *The Fortnightly* in July, and a column on Canon Bassett's book in *The Times* only last Thursday. Now then!"

"Good Lord! is that true?"

"Pooh!" he laughed; "a mere fraction of the immense truth. Did you see that parcel beside my plate at breakfast?"

I nodded.

"Not inquisitive enough to look at the label even, I suppose?"

"No," I smiled.

"A pity; you'd have seen that it came from Longmans Green, the publishers; and if you'd then carried your natural paternal interest a step further you'd have learned it was the proofs of my first book *God and My Right*."

"You're not pulling the paternal leg?" I asked; and at his headshake and smile I went on, "I'm glad; damnably glad; more than I can say, Alister; it's great."

"H'm; better read it first."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that side of it; but the fact that you're—"

"One minute! but that's the only side *worth* bothering about. Suppose we talk about that for a change."

"Time we were thinking of getting back, isn't it?"

"Oh, we'll run back; you said you wanted a sweat."

"I'm sweating already," I grimaced. "But go ahead; You know my views anyhow;" and then I added, "I used to think they were yours also."

He nodded. "Let's go back a bit," he said; "a slum curacy and so forth. Although in the Church's house are many mansions I didn't enter it for a career; you didn't think that, did you?"

"I didn't know what to think; it struck me as a precious poor one anyhow; worse than medicine, which has some base of truth. And what of leprosy? All that wasted study."

He smiled at this. "Never mind leprosy; nothing is wasted." And then he went on, "It's a bit awkward, Father, for a young man to talk about God without sounding like a prig but I'm going to do it. You don't believe in God because you say there's no evidence for his existence."

"I've never heard of any worth tuppence," I replied; "but we've discussed this years ago and, as I say, you agreed with me."

"Well," laughing; "I still do largely."

"What?"

"In the matter of evidence," he rejoined; "but then I don't think it matters two straws about evidence."

"You don't believe in the existence of God then?"

"But I do."

"But, hang it all, Alister, without evidence! You're not going to sling the faith bunkum at me surely?"

"I've not preached my first sermon yet," he smiled; "and I can't say I'm looking forward to it; but there's no harm done by going into training; let's have a try-out on the dog!"

Not that I propose in my first sermon at St. James's to discuss the evidence for God; something safer than that."

" You're going to produce the evidence, is that it? You'll have to hurry; I'll have another pipe and then we must make a move. Go ahead."

" You remember the mathematicians for years were subbing it into the astronomers that there was a planet missing in our system and a big one? We know it's there, they said, getting red-faced about it, because Venus's orbit swings so and Saturn's so and Uranus's so and they wouldn't do that unless there was another planet pulling them. Ergo go and find it."

" And they looked and found it. What about it?"

" Seems to me it's the same with God. I don't believe we've found him yet, but I believe so many things point to the fact that he must exist and the injunction therefore is: Go and find him."

" Hence the slum curacy?"

" Yes; partly. But there's more than that about it; even if nothing pointed to the existence of God I should believe in his existence because of its very necessity."

" Well, you're not very original there!" I laughed. " Necessitarianism, isn't it? It's never struck me as being watertight; on a par with the old fallacy; a watch postulates a watchmaker, a world postulates a creator. You've not been caught on that hook, have you? You certainly weren't on it the last time we talked religion. I imagine you agreed with me then that one could dodge the necessity of a creator quite logically."

" Dodge it then."

" Matter is indestructible!" I chanted; " don't pretend you've forgotten the rubbish."

" You admit it's rubbish?"

" I think most things rubbish now, I'm afraid. But I think it does dodge it."

" You mean about infinity? If things have no end they

therefore had no beginning; they always were and will be; hence no creator; isn't that the rigmarole?"

"If you think you're going to inveigle me into arguing until it's too late to walk back," I laughed, "you're mistaken; I'm going to have my sweat; let's be moving."

"I'm ready," he replied, jumping to his feet; "I was only trying to point out that while there's no evidence for God yet there is something which makes his existence a certainty."

"You seem to have got ahead of the rest of the world," I chaffed; "but what is that something?"

"Just this: upon no other assumption can we square the facts of life."

"I could suggest a dozen other assumptions; but I won't; I'll admit it to save argument; but even then you've to find your God."

"Exactly. *En avant!* I mean for Portscatho," he added laughing.

"In a slum?"

"Isn't that a fact of life?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "All right, Alister," I rejoined, with a wry smile; "then *en avant* by all means—to both places."

CHAPTER XV

"SPEAK NOT OF COMFORT WHERE NO COMFORT IS;
SPEAK NOT AT ALL—CAN WORDS MAKE FOUL THINGS FAIR?"

ALISTER's disclosure to me of his literary activities had left me with a feeling of disappointment not untouched with resentment; it was true, as he had said, that I now read nothing, but I could not keep the unhappy thought from invading my mind that he had not told me because he felt I no longer cared about such things; that I had fallen into a state where the things of the mind mattered nothing at all; and as I remembered all the hours we had spent together with books from his very earliest days, all those I had so gladly read to keep pace with him or to answer his countless questions, and the big manuscript anthology I had begun and presently we had continued together, I allowed myself to drift into a mood of depression but faintly mitigated by the plain bright evidence that even in the career he had chosen there was no reason why he should not have the brilliant future his talents merited and his early promise foreshadowed. Regard the matter from whatever aspect I might I could not understand why he had kept from me what he must have known would give me infinite pleasure and delight. I am sure he felt something of this and whatever the motives might have been for his secrecy he regretted them and certainly during the next two years he did everything to make amends, sending me clippings of all his work in the reviews and an inscribed advance copy of each of the three books he wrote in succession to *God and My Right*. I did not tell him that, in my turn, I subscribed to nearly every serious periodical published in England, as well as the heavier dailies, so that I might miss nothing from his pen, and might have, as I did

on one or two occasions, the unbounded pleasure of writing to congratulate him before I received from him a copy of the article in question.

The duties of his curacy did not, I gathered, leave him much time for literary work, but I not infrequently came across his name in the course of my now wide and almost frenzied reading; and it was quite plain that he was beginning to make a niche for himself as a writer on religious polemics; how that warmed my heart and brought back to me some measure of the pride that had so inspirited me in those early days when he had gone romping gaily along taking, as it seemed to me, prizes, scholarships and exhibitions in his stride. I cannot hope to find words to express the glowing thrill it gave me to come across in the body of an article by some other writer some such phrase as "Dr. Alister Carden" (have I not said he was already a doctor of divinity? and an M.A. to boot: Alister Carden, M.A., D.D.) "very ably argues in the current issue of *The Spectator*." I wonder if there is any other happiness so great as that; if there is I have never known it; one's own successes (not that I ever had any worth mentioning) are in comparison nothing at all. Ambition! by that sin fell the angels! Well, I've never been bothered much about ambition; perhaps I knew that I could never stay the course; but ambition for one's son; no angels fell by that! Had I been the most ambitious man alive I am sure it would have been swallowed up by this immense ambition for Alister. It was a sweet draught; a draught that was to do more for me than run a happy riot in my blood; was to arm me to fight when most I needed a strong weapon; would have won perhaps for me a final victory had things been different. I drank deeply of that sweet draught; that the cup was wrenched from me cannot rob me of that; eternity cannot take that away.

As I write these things about Alister's early successes as a writer it comes to me how strange it is, how it reverses the ordinary custom of biography, that the father should be writ-

ing thus about the son. How few such books there are; how small indeed the total amount of such writing there must be and much of that almost negligible quantity is limited to the heartrending literature of untimely death: *Philip, his father, laid here the twelve-years-old child, his high hope, Nicoteles.* And again, *Ever insatiate Charon, why hast thou wantonly taken young Attalus? was he not thine, even if he had died old?*

But that sweet warming draught, strong and inspiriting as it was, might and, in fact, did slacken my descent into ever deeper and deeper pits, but it could not stop it; I had gone too far; the spirit might indeed fight but the flesh turned traitor. I have surely made plain enough the condition in which now I was living at The Nurseries and no one will demand that I strip from myself the last few rags; there is a point at which even the most inquisitive must be moved to halt; a point where charity cries out with averted face: Hold, enough! Have I not reached that point? Is the scalpel to cut a little nearer the heart? the probe to go deeper? This is not self-pity or whining; I mixed my cup and I have drained it; and, however foul the dregs, some of it was sweet; yes, even now I say that; and I am glad I drank.

During those two years Alister came three times to see me at The Nurseries but he did not bring Penelope. His letters during that period were not very frequent and were usually little more than brief notes accompanying some book or an article of his, with a very occasional longer one containing news of his work at St. James's or descriptions of places visited or short holidays with Penny—short holidays they were indeed; I do not think any of them could be called much more than a long week-end.

But after his second visit to me he wrote me quite a long letter and it is the only one he ever wrote me which I have lost. Shall I leave it at that? Just lost. Or admit the truth for the sake of its significance? It was taken from my drawer and destroyed. By Rachel? Whom else? I had only read it

a few times or I should now remember more of its actual wording; but I have the gist of it. There was quite a lot of news about his work in Bow; a rather humorous account of the Bishop of London's visit to St. James's and of the sermon he preached there, and of the short and very commendatory chat his lordship had with him; there was also a hint that he might shortly go to the large parish of St. Botolph's, Hoxton, as senior curate (how quaintly that read to me, that Alister should be senior anything; and yet why not? he was seven-and-twenty); there was further the exciting news that one of his books (his third it must have been *Saul, Why Persecutest Thou Me?*) was to be published in the United States and there was a delightful vivid little description of a day's excursion to Whitstable in Kent for five hundred of the poorest children of the parish. And at the end of this account the letter abruptly left his own affairs and came to mine; Rachel might tear up and burn the paper upon which the words were written but she could not erase them from my mind. "I am sure, Father, that you are not well and I hope you will not misunderstand me if I say that I was shocked at your appearance and more than a little surprised and, indeed, hurt at the way things appeared to me to be going at The Nurseries. It was not that there were any signs of the business going to pieces, far from it, its prosperity was more apparent than ever; and, indeed, if it had only been a matter of prosperity I should not have mentioned it for, as you know, the financial side does not interest me very much, and as far as my own pocket is concerned I don't think I have spent a hundred pounds of the thousands that are accumulating in my account as my third share; and for that matter Tessa has never touched a penny. No, it was not that at all, but simply, and I am afraid this will hurt you, that you seemed, far from being the head and the controlling power, to be the one person never consulted, just a cipher, a name on the firm's stationery and no more, as if you were dead and the business merely retained the old name. I don't wish to go into the

reasons for this; it is plain there are many and that the responsibility for the change is no one person's; part of it, Father, is and must be yours and is due largely I am sure to the clear fact that you are not well. I am perfectly certain that for your bodily health (and you must allow a person to add for your spiritual health also) you ought to get away for a long holiday, at least six months, and I suggest in all seriousness a voyage round the world; please yourself what sort of craft you go in, liner, sailing clipper, cattle-boat, even a canoe! but go and go at once, go without scrip or staff; although you needn't forget travellers' cheques—and you can buy all of those you need; there's no lack of money and if you've not enough you know very well you can milk my swollen account to the last drop. But go. ALISTER."

I wonder, if I had taken that affectionate advice, whether things might not have been different. I doubt it; I think it was too late; and, indeed, more and more I find myself tending to accept the fatalistic view of life, weak and demoralising as I know it to be, and to hold, beyond all reason, that we are creatures predestined and foredoomed, that leagued against us are the blind Fates, careless and wayward as children smiting down thistle-heads in a field.

And shortly afterwards an incident happened at The Nurseries, small enough perhaps in its way but humiliatingly wounding, which, while it served to underline the truth of Alister's letter, would certainly have decided me against accepting his advice had I been inclined to do so. I say an incident small enough in its way; that it seemed so to me then is only too wretchedly significant of my bondage and of the many other incidents akin to it which I must have ignored or endured without protest.

Again it was a matter of dismissal by Rendle and again the man, a labourer Bates, appealed to me. But the salient fact was that the appeal was made in Rendle's presence and that Rachel was also there. It was no fault of the man's which led to such a situation; he was not such a fool as that! I was

alone when he began his story but Rachel and Rendle came up and he was too confused and scared to stop, but went stammering on, while Rachel stood smiling by and Rendle regarded us both with an insolent grin. They did not interrupt; oh, I was permitted to hear him out; and then Rachel said roughly, "That'll do, Bates; Mr. Carden doesn't want to be pestered with that rubbish." And Rendle, without waiting for me to speak, or even looking in my direction, jerked with his thumb and said sharply, "Clear out!" Bates stood his ground for a moment and looked at me hopefully (the poor fool!) but I avoided his glance, hoping he would go before I touched bottom. And suddenly Rendle (for which I hope I may yet have a reckoning with him) grinned and drawled, "If you're waiting for Mr. Carden to confirm it, Bates, I've no doubt he'll oblige you." His insolent stare held my glance and I turned and looked at Rachel and then and there touched bottom and said, "I'm sorry, Bates; I can't interfere; you're dismissed."

A few weeks after Alister's third visit to me at The Nurseries (these visits were separated by a considerable time, the third from the second by quite a year, so that he was then in his twenty-ninth year) he wrote to me to say that his engagement to Penelope had been broken off by mutual consent. ". . . there's no rancour or ill-feeling," the letter went on, "or anything of that nature, at all, Father; we're the best of friends but we just aren't going to marry; not each other that is; Penny I hope will soon marry someone else (not that at the moment there's anyone on the horizon!); as for me I've no intention of marrying at all now or at any future time." It was natural enough, I suppose, that I inferred from this that it was Penny who had been responsible for ending the engagement and that his boyish pronouncement of irrevocable celibacy was due to pique and hurt feelings. I could not have been wider of the mark; but it was an inference which, as I say, was a natural and logical one and it cer-

tainly dictated the carefully discreet tone of my reply. He must have smiled when he read it; but he allowed nearly another year to pass before he put me right and then there was so much else he had to tell me that the revelation was relatively unimportant, although actually it was significant enough.

And that revelation? Simply that he had asked Penelope to release him from his engagement, not because his feelings towards her had changed, but because his whole attitude to life had changed, and that he was determined on a life of celibacy. At the time of the breaking off of the engagement I do not think that he had gone, consciously, any further than a desire to remain celibate for its own sake, just because he felt (and the important point is what he felt and not what I or anyone else may think about the abstract question of celibacy) just because he felt, I say, that by such a victory over the flesh he could immeasurably strengthen himself spiritually for the arduous life to which he had dedicated himself. But that there was already in him a bias which played, quite unaware as he may have been of the fact, a considerable part in that decision I have no doubt at all. It is true that this is wisdom after the event; but consider the facts. He parted, by his own desire, with a girl he had loved for five years and still, by his own confession, loved as much as ever. Twelve months after the breaking off of the engagement he was offered by the Bishop of London the vicarship of the famous St. Asaph's Church, Mayfair, from whose pulpit so many celebrated men had preached and the vicariate of which was a coveted plum, so coveted, indeed, that when the offer became public it aroused, I will not say, a storm of controversy but certainly a squall, not only in the ecclesiastical papers, but in the general press; the core of the trouble was, of course, that Alister was only twenty-nine and despite his brilliant talents and his growing reputation he was, therefore, absurdly, incongruously, young for a post none of whose previous holders, with the exception of the famous Doctor

Stuart Mapleden, had been under fifty—and Mapleden himself was forty at the time of his induction. I do not think the squall would have blown so gustily, so bitingly, if Alister had accepted the offer immediately, but he asked for a month to consider his decision. That all this leaked out at all is one of those mysteries of public life which the cynic claims to solve by one or other of the phrases "boudoir gossip" and "bedroom confidences." And then, when the squall had blown out its brief tumult, it was learned that Alister had refused the offer; that was surprising; the sequel was startling and to me, I admit, devastating, shocking. Let me put it in the bald words of the notice in *The Morning Chronicle* rather than in the more intimate terms of Alister's communication to me a day later: *We understand upon the most unquestionable authority that the Rev. Alister Carden, M.A., D.D. will shortly be received into the Church of Rome.* That was all. I repeat that it came upon me shatteringly and I do not think there is any need for me to enlarge upon that plain statement of its effect upon me; nor would it serve any purpose if I embroidered it with Alister's letter to me, for that was, indeed, no more (how could it be?) than mere embroidery of the stark fact. In the face then of these events is it not perfectly clear that when Alister broke off his engagement he was already, ignorant as he may have been of it, far along the path which led to Rome?

And so I faced the fact and made the best of it, not realising at all what it meant to me and to him. I was crass fool enough to imagine that it would after all make little difference and that, indeed, our association might become closer than it had been for years; the blind folly of ignorance!

Necessarily I must give this account of Alister's conversion to Rome in terms of my own feelings, my own reactions to events, my own unhappiness; what it meant to him he alone can say and (it is a bitter thought to me now) in that he never gave me his confidence. But much of what he endured may be imagined if one has sufficient sensitiveness or, if that be lack-

ing, the life of Cardinal Newman is a revealing document in which one item is typical of many, the libel action brought by the recusant Italian friar Dr. Achilli against Newman, as a result of which the new convert to Rome was, against all the evidence, found guilty by his old friend Sir John Taylor Coleridge and sentenced to a fine of £100 and imprisonment until it was paid; and the costs, which Newman had also to pay, amounted to £12,000. You will note the phrase "by his old friend" and further you will I trust absolve me, a man who abominates Roman Catholicism, from the charge of partiality.

As I have said, I did not have Alister's confidence in this matter, but I am convinced that the step from the Church of England to the Church of Rome is, for a clergyman, in most cases one of martyrdom; of doubts and heartsearchings and difficulties; of loss of friends; of deliberate misrepresentation of motives; it is a complete break with the past and with so much that is held dear; a step, indeed, needing the last ounce of strength and endurance to carry through.

But let us leave the region of surmise and come to more ponderable matters; the actual events, open for all eyes to see, of Alister's conversion.

Shortly after he had gone to St. James's he became acquainted with Father Halliday, S.J., who was priest of that small Roman Catholic church in Carey Street, Soho, which attracted so many non-Catholics to its services because of the fine singing of its choir; that anyhow was the ostensible reason—but we are not concerned with reasons; undoubtedly too Father Halliday's preaching had more than a little to do with the size of the mixed congregation even if one ignores the attractive personality of the man himself. Ironically enough it was through Penelope that Alister came to know Halliday, for the priest's young brother (his junior by twenty years) had been a friend of David's at Malvern; the family by the bye were Protestant and the elder son had been a convert to Rome in his early twenties,

The acquaintanceship rapidly became something warmer, for the two had much in common, despite a difference of twenty-one years in their ages and other wider differences, not the least that of creed. I imagine that Alister at first regarded the older man with a touch of hero-worship, for the priest was not only his equal in intellectual brilliance (that in itself being notable, for Alister up to that point in his career had crossed swords with no one he was unable to master) but possessed something which the younger man knew he would never have, the orator's heart-moving gift. The inner course of that friendship must remain unrevealed; I can only deal with the surface facts and the only salient one is that it was to Father Halliday that Alister first disclosed his desire to enter the Church of Rome. It might be thought that all was then plain sailing; far from it; it seems that for a Protestant to enter the Roman Church (and especially a Protestant clergyman) is as tight a squeeze as that of the laden camel through that narrow gate called the Needle's Eye. Halliday had first to satisfy himself of Alister's *bona fides* in the spiritual sense and, although there was between them a friendship of several years, many months (and how many long hours of discussion!) were to pass before the priest could take the next step, which was to obtain the permission of the Bishop of the Diocese to receive the convert into the Church.

This was done and the Bishop suggested to Alister that he should first of all spend a fortnight in quiet prayer and meditation in a religious House and recommended Woodchester Priory at Stroud in Gloucestershire.

He was received there ("received" is the technical term; there was no reception, no fuss, no trumpets) and at the end of his fortnight he made his first confession. Six weeks later he was confirmed at Westminster Cathedral.

Then and then only (or so I understand) he first made it known to Father Halliday that he desired to become a priest and was instructed to offer himself to the Bishop. Another month passed before he was accepted. And there the way

ended? There indeed it only began for he was now to be swallowed up (I use the phrase quite literally) for four years; he was to be separated from me almost as completely as if he were dead; not only separated by space (although Italy is far enough) but by a course of study that left him little time for any other interests and by a spiritual metamorphosis which, it seemed to me, made him remote from all earthly relationships. He was sent to the Beda College in Rome to study. When I heard his sentence (for as such I considered it) I did not completely realise what it was going to mean and, indeed, not until his first year was finished there (during which he studied little else but philosophy) did I come to understand how utterly he was cut adrift from me, the sole link remaining (a gossamer thread) his brief monthly letters headed: Collegio Beda, Via San Niccolo da Tolentino 67 Rome 5. How wretchedly unsatisfactory those letters were! how short, how cool, how aloof they seemed; how utterly pre-occupied with things I despised or hated or found ludicrous, grotesque, incredible; how remote he seemed from me, in body, mind and spirit; remote, unreachable.

But before that first year was ended I had been struck a blow as shattering in its effect upon my everyday existence as his conversion had been upon my inner life and strangely enough that mere superficial shock did more for me than that bitter searching thrust into the very heart of my being.

Rendle's insolence, for years more or less veiled, had of late become increasingly brazen; he no longer rendered even lip-service to my authority and had ceased entirely to consult me. I could not hide from myself the fact that he had in Rachel an ally against whom I could not fight; but I resolutely thrust away from me the realisation of how close that alliance was. During Alister's early months in Rome the state of affairs at The Nurseries grew more and more intolerable and would have goaded into revolt any man less sunk in depression than I was, less enmeshed in the inescapable net of a woman's body. It is clear enough to me now how

closely the two were leagued against me, how they played with me, enjoying the spectacle of how much I would endure, savouring my degradation on their adulterous mocking tongues; clear enough too that they were tiring of their sport and eager for the outburst which would enable them to put the onus for the break upon me. It is ironical that the very deeps of humiliation I had reached for long defeated them; how they must have cursed the dumb contemptible worm which refused to turn. No worm turns while any hope remains; that, I imagine, is the truth behind all revolts and rebellions; the desperate are the hopeless. And I was at last without hope in the one matter that was still, for all my bondage to Rachcl, the king-post of my life, since Alister was now, as it seemed, lost to me in body, mind and spirit.

And so, gradually during those slow months of that first year, I nerved myself, half-unconsciously, to revolt. And as the determination grew in me there grew with it a passionate furious hunger for a reckoning with Rendle; to get rid of him would not satisfy that hunger, only by smashing my fists again and again into his grinning face could I hope for assuagement. As well might I have hoped to lug the sun out of the sky to strike him; I was fifty-six, Rendle at least sixty; but he looked and was a man still in his physical prime; he was an abstemious man who all his life had kept a tight rein upon his appetites; upon all but one; or perhaps it was his only strong appetite and while he could satisfy that he was able to ignore the mild importunity of the others; whatever the reason, he was at sixty as physically powerful as he had ever been while I was drink-sodden, flabby, nerveless, a near brother of those poor devils who sink, shifty-eyed and hopeless, along the gutters of our towns or shamble in their broken boots dustily and forlornly through lovely summer villages, scaring the children and serving as a text for gossiping women plumply smiling in rose-covered porches.

I do not remember the exact circumstances which precipitated my revolt; how should I when there were daily a score

which would have served? One or another it does not matter; I nerved myself for the ordeal and sent for Rendle to my sitting-room. I did not expect him to come; half-hoped, indeed, that he would not and thus give me an additional reason for my action. However, he came, came only too gladly, no doubt. I asked him to sit down and he perched himself upon a corner of the table and regarded me with a grin. He was wearing nothing but trousers and shirt, the neck open, the sleeves rolled high up, for despite his position he often worked with the men, preferring to do a job himself, as he often boasted, rather than to look on; his face, neck and arms were bronzed, and under his thin cotton shirt, semi-transparent with sweat, the muscles of his chest and belly stood out like bosses of steel. I wasted no time in explanation. "I've decided, Rendle," I said, "to terminate your engagement. You're entitled to a month's notice; in consideration of your services I propose to give you three months' salary in lieu of notice and you will therefore go at once." At this he laughed, and as if it were a prearranged signal the door opened and Rachel came in. I watched them exchange amused glances and opened my mind to what I had long refused to recognise as the truth, and for a long, bitter moment wavered in my resolve. "I'm fired," Rendle said, his tone mocking, contemptuous.

"Is that right, Richard?" she asked, turning her wanton look on me. But I kept my face averted and for a while made no reply, while they watched to see me make yet another surrender. But this time they watched in vain; from some forgotten well I drew strength and looked up and faced them both. "That's right," I said harshly.

They both laughed and Rachel said, "Are you firing me too?"

"You must please yourself," I answered, near the end of my forces, but holding out well enough to deceive them.

And at this Rendle got off the table and, going over to Rachel, took her in his arms and kissed her mouth; and I

knew he was trying to goad me to hit him so that he might have the added pleasure of thrashing me before they left. But I was past all goading, drained even of my anger; and I sat still and watched their fondling as a disembodied spirit might watch two lovers in a bed. And presently, without another word to me or another look in my direction, they went, and I heard their loud laughter as they clumped along the passage to the stairs. They went away together that afternoon.

And, as if the shock had uncovered in me new springs of strength, I set myself to work for the first time in many years. That very night I wrote to Ben Fitton, telling him I had sacked Rendle and offering him the post. And when I went to bed shortly before midnight I went sober, and lay awake till three o'clock, my brain icily clear, my mind tormented with my thoughts; but they were at least the logical thoughts of sobriety and not the fuddled wanderings of drunkenness.

I was sitting in my room the next evening smoking and going through the accounts when one of the maids came in and said Mr. Ferguson wanted to see me. My mind full of my task (an enlightening task it was!), and surprised at the name, I was unable for a moment to reply, and turned round to stare into her rosy moon-face. She, I imagine, was about to repeat her announcement when the door opened again and Jamie entered. "Evening, Carden," he said throatily, "couldn't wait on courtesy; how's things?" and he dropped clumsily on to my big settee and sat there puffing and gasping and grinning.

I pushed the papers away from me and slewed round my chair, wondering how much he knew. But he did not leave me long in doubt. "So she's left you, hey? bolted."

I nodded and he chuckled hoarsely and then went on, "Bolted with a fancy man, hey, Carden! like her mother did before her. D'you care?"

I did not reply but he needed none and continued, more as if talking to himself than addressing me, "That's the hell,

hey? the hot hell; still love her; we'll not say love; still want her; still hungry for her; as I was for her mother; as I am still, the wanton bitch, may God blast her soul. All alone now, hey? Well, let's have a drink."

I mumbled some apology or other and got out glasses and the whisky and we helped ourselves. "That's the one who won't fail you," he chuckled; "women will betray you, children desert you, friends cheat you and leave you naked to your enemies; but whisky will stand by you till the grave; ay, my boy! and cheat death of his terrors. Pah! let her go; what's one woman more than another? are their bellies any different? and the worms'll have them at last, Carden; but not whisky; by God, no!" laughing hoarsely and spluttering, so that the whisky ran down his chin and ropy throat, staining his white collar; "whisky'll beat the worms in the grave; drink up, man; another and another cup to drown the memory of that impertinence! Gosh! that's good, hey? impertinence; but who cares while the bottle's full!"

"How's Nellie?" I asked, for the sake of saying something.

"Nellie, hey?" grinning and shooting at me a mockingly lascivious glance; "blows the wind that way, man? Come along, you're welcome! what's hospitality that stops short of a bedfellow; custom of the county once, hey? Come along, man. You can drive me back. No? heck! what's the fuss about? you're welcome; true friendship; God! the bottle's empty."

It was nearly midnight before I could persuade him to go, and I had to send down to the village for one of our van drivers to drive him back to Crofton. I was by no means drunk myself, but my head was certainly not sufficiently clear to continue with the accounts, which, in the short time I had already given to them, I had discovered were likely to prove an extremely interesting if disconcerting study. I did, indeed, give considerable time to them during the next few days, but I finally decided not to push investigation any further. The plain fact which emerged was that Rendle had been feather-

ing his nest for years; or rather, I should say, had been feathering the nest he had been getting ready for Rachel; doubtless she had assisted in the feathering. I was, I am sure, wise to realise that no purpose would be served by further ferreting and that it was best to reckon it as a bad debt and forget it; the fewer things from the past with which I occupied my mind the sooner should I be able to walk firmly on the road of rehabilitation which, I was determined, if it were humanly possible, to follow.

I do not pretend any such nonsense as that I became a reformed character, a new man; that the devil put on sack-cloth and ashes and leered through a halo; nothing of the sort happened; lacking some thaumaturgical intervention nothing of the sort could happen at my age; and I have an unshakeable disbelief in such miraculous fingers in mortal pies. But I did make a great and moderately successful effort to pull myself together; to do regular daily work and take an interest in that work; to get frequent exercise in the open air; and to cut down my heavy drinking, replacing whisky, except upon special occasions, by light bitter ale.

There is no need to enlarge upon that effort; it is like war; if you've experienced it yourself you know all there is to know; if you've never been through the experience all the words at the command of a Shakespeare, even if they were written in fire across the heavens, would help you but little to understand.

It was the sort of effort in which no one else can be of much assistance; but what little help was possible Ben Fitton gave me. For he came back to The Nurseries; was glad to come, and would have accepted his former salary; almost, indeed, had to be half-laughingly threatened with a second firing before he would take Rendle's salary. His wife, Ann, and the babe came with him; Frank was now in a good post in Bradford and had elected to remain there. The baby was now a fine boy and, as the village was quick enough to remark, clearly enough Rendle's begotten son. I nursed for a while

the fantastic notion of taking him into Barnesford and confronting the bench of magistrates with such incontrovertible evidence of their maladministration of the law; but I knew they would have refused to see the likeness; blind Justice indeed!

And so, while Alister away in Rome studied his philosophy and later for three long years his divinity (are the ways, then, of a God so hard of comprehension?), and wrote to me month by month those brief, aloof, remote letters which did presently become warmer, more human, closer (or perhaps my returning health gave me a clearer insight), I, with Ben Fitton's help and none other earthly or divine, made my slow progress uphill to renewed strength, vigour and interest in life. The business did not suffer at all in material ways by Rendle's departure, and it gained enormously in the happiness, well-being and contentment of everybody concerned in it; for while Fitton had not Rendle's outstanding abilities he possessed that human, understanding touch which, despite all the cynics, does more to keep sand out of the machinery than all the threats, the spying, the hard-bargain driving, the tight-mouths, ram-chins and iron jaws of hectoring authority. At the end of Alister's third year in Rome I paid into Tessa's account four thousand three hundred and fifty pounds as her third share of the year's net profits and sent on to Alister a cheque for the same amount. In his reply he told me that Tessa had been for the last two or three months in New York, having obtained a post on one of the Hearst periodicals. Before he left Rome she had married an American journalist; that was the last news I have had of her.

And here I return to Alister. At the end of his third year he received his sub-diaconate at the hands of the Cardinal Protector of his college and took then, openly and before all men, that vow of celibacy which four years previously he had taken in his own heart.

Another year passed and, his course of study at the Beda being ended, he was raised to the diaconate and ordained

priest by His Eminence the Cardinal Vicar in St. John's Lateran Basilica.

His letter in which he described to me this ceremony ended with the overwhelming news that he was returning to England almost immediately; he would, he said, probably fly back, but would let me know in good time. And then he added a sentence which I read with a strange disquiet, "I cannot give you yet any definite news of my future plans; I had thought of a curacy in the poor quarters of Liverpool, but there is just a chance, a very little one, I'm afraid, that I may be honoured with an incredible opportunity; I've only just heard a rumour to that effect; more when I know myself; I'm too excited now to think of anything else. Your loving son, Alister."

A week elapsed with no further word from him and then a wire arrived from, of all unexpected places, Portscatho. It read: *Am here for six days please join me at once all news when we meet great news Alister.*

The wire did not reach me until four in the afternoon and I was unable to get farther than Exeter that night and did not reach Portscatho until noon the next day.

It was a blazing day of mid-June and before we went in to luncheon Alister and I stood on the lugger, as the road above the small rocky harbour was called, and smoked and talked and had our joy of that glad meeting. It was the first time I had seen him in his dress as a priest and for all its sombre austerity it became him well; he was nearly half a head taller than I, lean and straight, his fine face bronzed and alight with vitality and enthusiasm.

He did not at first tell me his great news; but when presently it could no longer be withheld the brightness of the sunny day seemed to darken, to grow cold, as he spoke; and despite all my efforts to hold it off a bleak sense of misery, wave by wave, swept over me. He was going as priest to the Leper Sanatorium at Sant' Angelo in the State of San Paolo, Brazil. That was the great news; the immense honour that had fallen upon him; and as I watched his vivid handsome face, its lines

now a little too fine, almost macerated, and listened to his glowing words, I cursed life and wished that I could die.

He was to sail in six days; six days from that very day; he had only known the day before he was to leave Rome that he had been accepted for this great work and that was why, having there and then decided (I think I guessed the reason), that he would like to spend his last hours in England at Portscatho, he had gone straight down there after he reached Croydon aerodrome and had delayed wiring me until his arrival.

We were both silent for a while after he had finished. I tried to force myself to congratulate him, to say at least something, but I could find no words and so stood still beside him and looked away across the sparkling waters of Gerrans Bay. He put an arm affectionately about my shoulder but refrained from speaking, feeling, I knew, that just then there was nothing he could say to help me. The tension of those long-drawn-out moments became unbearable and I was incexpressibly relieved when he suddenly pointed out over the Bay and said, "D'you see the basking sharks?" I followed the direction of his hand and saw three or four huge dorsal fins protruding several feet above the water a bare quarter of a mile out from the harbour. "Big fellows, aren't they?" he said. "Quicker to realise they're as harmless as lambs and couldn't bite a blanc-mange; over twenty feet long and weighing six or seven tons and they feed in the fashion of a new-born babe. I was out after pollack this morning in Ernic Chenoweth's dinghy and passed within a dozen yards of one of them; a real thumper nearly thirty feet, I should think, and his dorsal stuck out of the water twice the height of my dinghy; he took no notice of me as I passed; asleep and dreaming, probably; I wonder what sharks dream about?"

"They may be as harmless as the fishermen, say," I said, with an attempt at lightness; "but I'd prefer to give them a wide berth if I were out in a twelve-foot dinghy. One flick of

their tail, and harmless as lambs or not, they'd make match-wood of it."

He laughed. "I dare say; but it's one of the things they don't do. In the basking-shark code of behaviour it just isn't done. Feeling hungry? Great. We've a lobster for luncheon that will satisfy even your capacity, unless that's grown with your bald patch." And again he laughed and, removing his biretta, he bent his head and showcd me his tonsure and said lightly, "Absalom's locks are shorn, Father."

We went bathing that afternoon and after dinner clambered up to the high ground above the village and sat down in a field and watched the moon climbing up out of the sea. For a long while we sat smoking, each preoccupied with his own thoughts, and then, presently, he began to talk of the work that awaited him and sought, I think, to fire me with something of his enthusiasm. I remember him saying with almost a touch of regret in his voice that perhaps it would have been better if, after all, he'd obtained his medical degree first; it would have assisted him in his work. And then he smiled and added, "But God is more than enough." And I asked him, "Do you dream of miracles then, Alister?" "Are they impossible, Father?" he said. And as he looked at me I bore false witness against myself and betrayed my reason and forswore a lifetime's conviction and replied quietly, "Perhaps not, my boy, perhaps not; who am I to say no?" And presently, while he talked with a sort of inspired sunny gravity, I began to allow my mind to play with fantastic dreams to keep at bay the tide of desolation lapping at my heart. He was looking out across the moonlit bay and I watched his shadowed face and clutched to me my toys of fantasy; I saw him as a cardinal, a prince of the Church, a magnificent figure walking slowly in some vast procession; why not? my thought whispered its foolish solace; are his talents not brilliant enough for the highest honours of his Church? The Pope; again why not? Once more an English Pope; how well he would become that supreme office; His Holiness Pope Innocent the—the—but

there, through ignorance, I balked, the fantastic dream dissolved and I came back to the harsh reality. "I'm cold," I said, "let's go in."

We had planned to have a morning's fishing the next day, but at the last minute I would not go; I wanted to have a few hours to sit alone in the sunshine and think things over once more.

"Aren't you well, Father?" he asked.

"As fit as a fiddle!" I rejoined heartily. "I just want a lazy morning to doze over a pipe and a book." He understood and did not press me, contenting himself with asking if I would like him to stay with me; at which I laughed and told him all I wanted was fresh mackerel for luncheon and there were plenty in the bay and I'd be obliged if he'd bustle off and get some.

"Dinghy's a bit slow for mackerel," he replied; "but I'll do my best." And with a warm smile and a wave of his hand he left me.

I read for some time without knowing what I read and at last closed my book and drowsed over my pipe and finally fell asleep and did not wake till nearly one o'clock. He had not yet returned and I strolled down to the little harbour to meet him.

I had turned off the lugger on to the slipway when I saw three or four fishermen with whom I was on nodding terms coming up towards me. I saw them hesitate and then stop and turn their backs to me; and abruptly I knew as if the sky had become one vast voice and were shouting its tidings in my ears. I went on slowly down the slope, unconscious of thought or movement; and as I approached, one of the men, Fred Sawle, left the group and came to me and said quietly, "I'm afraid, sir, there's been an accident."

"Where is he?" I asked.

He shook his head. "We don't know, sir; Tom Over's boat picked up the oars of the dinghy about a mile this side of the Gull Rock; Ernie's name's burnt on the leathers, that's

how we knew them; there warn't no sign of the dinghy anywhere nor—nor—" he ended lamely; and then, his eyes on my face, he went on, "Perhaps he's been picked up, sir; no need to give up hope; there's half a dozen boats still out." But I knew there was no hope. I knew Alister was dead and I turned from him and went back up the slipway and along the lugger under the hot sun and did not know that I went.

What purpose will it serve if I tell of those next few days? What is there to tell? Theories and guesses. But I knew; knew as if I had seen it with my eyes; knew the pitiful, blind, futile accident that had taken his life; it seemed so foul, so grotesquely appalling; a vast beast, sleepy, inert, gross, stupid; of all the creatures of the earth the dullest, the most harmless; and that witless immensity with one sleepy, careless flick of its tail had destroyed him, blotted out for ever all his brilliance, his loveliness, his fineness; all his years of work and enthusiasm and endeavour, all his burning faith, all his sacrifices; all his victory over the flesh had come to this; this pitiful futile end, of all deaths the vilest by the very mockery of its blind chance.

And so I waited for his body.

A week went by. They told me there was little hope now even for that; they came to me with explanations; they said his body must be under the smashed dinghy and would now never come ashore. I did not listen to them and they went away. Another week passed and a third and yet another; and I listened at last to what they said and came back home.

That was a year ago. It is again summer; the weather bright and hot; but I do not know how the days pass or the nights; the whisky helps me not to think; it stands by me, as Ferguson said it would, when all else is gone.

I was sitting in my room the other evening, a night, two nights perhaps, it was ago. I sat in the darkness and all about me the ghosts gathered and whispered. My father and mother and May and Uncle Fred and Aunt Alice and little Paul; there were Meakin and Kelsey and Sprague; Hayter and Telfer and drunken Cannon; Batley and Vosper; Goble and

Dassey; Connie and Diana and many another; and Rachel with her wanton look and mocking laugh. And Barbara Grey; Barbara my dear love. But Alister was not there; he would not come; among all the ghosts I could not find him.

I sat there an old lonely man, a shadow calling up shadows, a drunken old man crying. Maudlin tears? the whisky? you say that? Had they trickled down my cheeks blood red there would have been someone to make that scoff.

And presently I drew the blinds and switched on the light and the shadows left me.

I sat down upon the settee. The door opened slowly and Rachel came in. She closed the door softly behind her and stood watching me with her wanton look, smiling, a cigarette in her mouth. She took off a light wrap she was wearing and dropped it on to a chair; but she came no nearer. She wore a flimsy white silk blouse and her arms and throat were bare.

I watched her, uncertain if she were not, too, a ghost.

"Aren't you going to give me a drink?" she said, still smiling.

And when I said nothing she moved over to the table and helped herself and then came over and sat beside me and drank and laughed and said, "Happy days!" and held her glass to my lips until I drank and laughed. It must have sounded like some laugh in hell, for she drew away from me for a moment and stared at me. But I only smiled into her wanton eyes and she put the glass down and leaned her head against my shoulder, so that her mane of hair was a net about my eyes. And presently she slipped the blouse from her shoulders and bared her breast and drew down my head there and wove all about me the net of her body. And after a while we drank and drank again and I laughed once more; but she was no longer afraid and did not draw away from me. And after a while we got up from the settee and kissed and went to bed.

I said nothing to her of Alister's death nor did she mention

it. Perhaps she knew; I did not care whether she knew or not; but I was glad she said nothing; the young parson, she always called him; the young parson, in that mocking voice of hers; but she said nothing and I kept my own counsel. I saved myself from that last degradation. I saved you from that shame, Alister. My son. My high hope. Oh, God! Alister, my son, my son.

THE END